

Harms of Removal Across Stages of Child Development

Preschoolers (3-5 years old)

The below information was created for use by court systems to identify, assess and mitigate the potential harmful impacts to children that result from forced separation of children from their family of origin by child welfare. This information SHOULD NOT be used to assess the developmental capabilities of a child, nor should it be used to draw any inferences about the safety of the child in the care of their parents or the ability of the parents to safely care for their child. Further, the information below is NOT intended for use in arguments that seek to delay family reunification or justify continued placement in out-of-home care.

Developmental Milestonesⁱ

As children grow into early childhood, their world will begin to open up. They will become more independent and begin to focus more on adults and children outside of the family. They will want to explore and ask about the things around them even more. Their interactions with family and those around them will help to shape their personality and their own ways of thinking and moving. During this stage, children should be able to ride a tricycle, use safety scissors, notice a difference between girls and boys, help to dress and undress themselves, play with other children, recall part of a story, and sing a song.



Center for Disease Control (2021). *Positive Parenting Tips: Preschoolers (3-5 years of age)*

<https://www.cdc.gov/child-development/positive-parenting-tips/preschooler-3-5-years.html>

Harms of Removal

Physical Development

The physical development of preschoolers is characterized by significant growth in both gross and fine motor skills. During this stage, children become more coordinated and confident in activities such as running, jumping, climbing, and throwing, which reflect their gross motor abilities. Their fine motor skills also improve, enabling them to perform tasks like drawing, cutting with scissors, and manipulating small objects with greater

ⁱ Developmental milestones are things most children can do by a certain age. Children reach milestones in how they play, learn, speak, behave, and move (like crawling, walking, or jumping). Developmental milestones are things most children (75% or more) can do by a certain age. [National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

precision. Preschoolers experience growth in height and weight, although at a slower pace than in infancy. Balance, agility, and hand-eye coordination continue to mature, allowing them to engage in more complex physical play. This period is crucial for building foundational physical abilities that will support more advanced skills in later childhood. The stress and trauma of being separated from familiar caregivers and environments can lead to disruptions in sleep, appetite, and overall health.¹ These disruptions may hinder growth and development, as children might experience weight loss, poor nutrition, or delayed physical milestones due to changes in routine and emotional distress. Specific harms of removal to physical development that preschoolers may experience include, but are not limited to, the following:



Toxic Stress: A sudden change in environment and primary caregiver is very stressful for preschoolers because they have little control over what happens to them. Being separated from their family by child welfare can be unpredictable and confusing, which causes ongoing stress for preschoolers. This constant high stress is called "toxic stress" and can have profound and lasting effects on their overall development.^{2,3} The chronic activation of the body's stress response can impair brain areas responsible for learning, memory, and executive function⁴, resulting in **delays in language acquisition, problem-solving skills, and attention**. Additionally, toxic stress can **weaken the immune system, increase vulnerability to physical health issues, and heighten the risk of behavioral problems**, such as aggression or withdrawal. Without supportive relationships with known adults and a nurturing environment to buffer these stressors, the impact can extend into later childhood and adulthood, affecting mental health, educational outcomes, and overall well-being.

Unfortunately, the child dependency court system often recognizes the effects of abuse and neglect while underestimating the serious impact of toxic stress caused by parental loss or sudden forced separation. Here are some harmful effects of toxic stress on a preschooler's developing brain and nervous system:

- Weakens the structure of the developing brain, which can lead to **lifelong physical and behavioral problems** like obesity, heart disease, COPD, diabetes, depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and behavior issues.⁵
- Affects the child's **thinking, learning, and memory**, leading to behaviors perceived as negative and difficulty controlling emotions.⁶
- Increases sensitivity and reactivity to their surroundings. These issues are sometimes wrongly blamed on the parents or misdiagnosed as psychiatric conditions. If not addressed, the child may show more psychological stress, leading to more disruptions in their placements and additional problems.⁷

Increased sensitivity and reactivity in this age disproportionately impacts Black and Native American children, especially when this response to toxic stress is related to preschool expulsion rates.⁸

- Undermines progress in **eating, sleeping, and toilet training**, causing temporary setbacks and delays. The child might have trouble sleeping, lose their appetite, be overly alert, show inappropriate boundaries, and have issues with incontinence (i.e., bed wetting) and toilet training.

Food & Eating Habits: The disruption of familiar routines and caregiving can have significant impacts on preschoolers' eating habits and nutritional intake. Preschoolers are often accustomed to specific foods, feeding routines, and the presence of familiar adults who know their preferences and dietary needs. **When they are placed in a new environment, such as foster care, they may encounter unfamiliar foods, different meal schedules and new eating utensils**, which can lead to a loss of appetite, picky eating, or even refusal to eat. Further, when the relationship with culturally-specific foods is disrupted, it can lead to a dislike of those tastes/textures simply because they're not as familiar with them as they grow. The emotional stress of separation can further affect their eating behavior, with some preschoolers possibly eating less due to anxiety or confusion. Ensuring continuity and sensitivity around the preschooler's diet is crucial to their physical and emotional well-being during this difficult transition

Maltreatment in Foster Care: Foster care is meant to provide a safe and caring environment for children who have been taken from their biological families because of abuse or neglect. However, it's important to recognize that abuse can and does still happen within the foster care system. This kind of abuse is especially harmful because it happens to children who are already vulnerable and in need of protection. Abuse in foster care can lead to compounded, long-term problems, affecting a child's behavior, emotional well-being, and ability to form healthy relationships. Preschool age children are often unable to fully comprehend or verbalize that maltreatment is occurring, which increases their vulnerability to experiencing this type of abuse.

While our understanding of the abuse and neglect that occurs in foster care is relatively limited, one prominent study of foster children in Oregon and Washington State found that nearly **one third reported experiencing maltreatment** by a foster parent or another adult in a foster home.⁹ It should be noted that this reporting included both reported and substantiated reports of abuse and/or neglect. Similarly, a separate study by Johns Hopkins University found that children who are in foster care are **four times more likely to be sexually abused** than other children not in this setting¹⁰, however this study was not specific to the preschool age group.

Emotional Development

The emotional development of preschoolers is marked by increased self-awareness, emotional expression, and the ability to understand and regulate their feelings. At this stage, children begin to experience a broader range of emotions, including pride, guilt, and empathy. They start to recognize their own emotions and those of others, which



helps them form deeper social connections. Preschoolers often develop a strong sense of independence and may assert their autonomy, while also seeking reassurance and comfort from caregivers when they feel overwhelmed. As they grow, their ability to control impulses and cope with frustration improves, though emotional outbursts can still occur. This period is essential for nurturing emotional intelligence and building the foundation for healthy relationships and self-control later in life.¹¹ Specific harms to emotional development that preschoolers may experience as a result of removal include, but are not limited to, the following:

Grief & Loss: Preschoolers experience grief and loss over family separation in unique and profound ways, often reflecting their developmental stage and limited understanding of complex emotions. Preschoolers may express feelings of sadness, confusion, anger, or anxiety. **They do not fully understand why the separation occurred, leading to feelings of abandonment or insecurity.** Changes in behavior can often be a sign of distress.¹² Preschoolers might exhibit regressive behaviors, such as bedwetting, thumb-sucking, or increased dependence on caregivers. They may also become more irritable or display aggression to cope with their feelings. Preschoolers might reenact scenarios related to their separation, reflecting their emotions and attempting to make sense of the situation.

During times of grief, preschoolers require extra support and reassurance from caregivers and trusted adults.¹³ Consistent love, patience, and open communication can help them navigate their feelings and foster a sense of security amid the upheaval. Understanding these experiences is crucial for caregivers and professionals working with children in these situations, as it enables them to provide appropriate support and create a nurturing environment for healing.

Loss of Perceived Safety: Preschoolers rely on familiar people, environments, and routines to regulate their emotions. Their world depends on predictability, and any changes can make them feel insecure. **Sudden changes in environment and routine can make young children feel unsafe, even if they are actually safe.** When removed from their parents, preschoolers lose their main source of comfort. They need familiar adults to feel secure, even in situations of abuse and neglect. When children don't feel safe, their ability to use the higher functions of their brains, like learning, self-control, and abstract thinking, can be greatly affected.¹⁴ The uncertainty and instability of moving to new environments, such as foster homes or institutional care, can also disrupt their sense of safety and trust. This may regress their ability to regulate

emotions, resulting in more frequent emotional outbursts, difficulty expressing feelings, or becoming overly dependent on new caregivers.

Emotional Regulation: Preschoolers rely heavily on known adults for emotional growth, and the loss of familiar bonds may trigger intense feelings of fear, confusion, and insecurity, which are difficult for preschoolers to understand or express.¹⁵ They may struggle to soothe themselves, leading to increased anxiety, aggression, or withdrawal. This stress can further **impede their ability to develop healthy coping mechanisms, potentially resulting in long-term challenges in emotional regulation and an increased risk for behavioral issues as they grow older.**¹⁶

Furthermore, the stress of removal can impair the development of emotional resilience, making it harder for preschoolers to form healthy emotional connections and cope with challenges in the future.

If a child needs to be removed, providing safe opportunities for frequent, meaningful family time visitation in the least-restrictive, most family-like setting possible is a major way that court systems can help support the emotional regulation of preschoolers, along with encouraging and supporting consistent contact with other non-caregiving adults in the child's life. However, even the highest quality family time possible does NOT completely mitigate the harms of removal.

The trauma of family separation is still likely to impact the ability of preschool age children to feel safe when visiting parents and the anticipation of another separation (i.e., end of the visit) may cause significant distress in these young children.



Ambiguity in Roles and Relationships: At this stage, children are still developing an understanding of how they fit into their family and community. Being removed from their home disrupts this process and development of their sense of self. It can also make it hard for them to understand "stranger danger" and appropriate boundaries, which can result in them being at high risk of abuse or neglect and can often create challenges when they move between different households with different rules, expectations, communication styles, and relationship structures.

If a child needs to be removed, clear, consistent, developmentally appropriate language should be used to communicate and clarify roles and relationships with preschoolers on a repeated basis throughout the life of the case, especially during times of transitions (e.g., removal; family time visits; trial return home).

Disinhibited Social Engagement Disorder (DSED): Growing up in multiple foster homes, having a lack of consistent caregiver, and experiencing maltreatment increase a child's risk for developing disinhibited social engagement disorder (DSED)¹⁷, which is characterized by difficulty forming emotional bonds with others and a lack of inhibition around strangers.¹⁸ Children with DSED do not express the need for a known caregiver to be social with a stranger and are incredibly trusting of strangers.¹⁹ Being diagnosed with DSED, especially at a young age, will likely result in these children facing increased levels of discrimination, stigma, and misunderstanding throughout their life, and especially in school and foster care settings.

Social Development

The social development of preschoolers involves significant growth in their ability to interact with others, form friendships, and understand social norms. During this stage, children become more interested in playing with peers, engaging in cooperative play, sharing, and taking turns. They begin to grasp the concept of rules and fair play, although conflicts over toys or games are still common as they learn to negotiate and resolve disputes. Preschoolers start to form friendships based on shared interests and activities, developing a sense of belonging within a social group. They also become more aware of social roles and expectations, often imitating adults and older children in their behavior. This period is critical for fostering social skills like empathy, communication, and teamwork, which are essential for positive relationships and success in group settings as they grow older. Specific harms to social development that preschoolers may experience as a result of removal include, but are not limited to, the following:

Disruption of Foundational Relationships: Preschoolers often seek comfort from their family when they are upset, scared, or anxious. Instability and frequent transitions between caregivers can also disrupt the development of key social skills like sharing, cooperation, and conflict resolution, as preschoolers may have fewer opportunities for consistent social interaction. Foundational relationships are critical for a child's future development, health, and well-being.²⁰ **Every young child has an inherent need for the caregiving environment provided by their biological parent(s). When the environment is determined to be unsafe it is the system's responsibility to offer resources and supports to ensure the safety of the caregiving environment.**

Sudden, unexpected changes in caregiving environment can confuse preschoolers' understanding of social norms, and they may struggle to navigate new social environments. These disruptions can have long-term effects on their ability to form and maintain healthy relationships in the future, potentially leading to behavioral issues or social difficulties as they grow older. The sudden absence of these foundational relationships can significantly impact preschoolers' social development and learning in the following ways:

Parents: The parent-child relationship is crucial in a child's early years, shaping their socio-emotional development, identity, sense of self, and opportunities for social interaction.²¹

Siblings: Removal from home due to abuse or neglect not only separates children from their parents but can also disrupt or end their relationships with their siblings, including doing long-term, irreparable damage to the sibling relationship. Siblings play an important role in helping children understand others' emotions, thoughts, intentions, and beliefs.

Secondary Relational Connections: These are strong emotional bonds that children form with caregivers beyond their primary relationships. This includes extended family, pets, early learning centers, daycare staff, medical or dental providers, and other trusted adults. These secondary connections are vital for nurturing a child's sense of security and emotional stability in social interactions.

Peer Friendships: Peer friendships in preschoolers are an important aspect of their social and emotional development, as children in this age group begin to form meaningful connections with other children beyond family members.²² These early friendships are typically based on shared activities, interests, and proximity, rather than deep emotional bonds, but they play a crucial role in teaching social skills, cooperation, and empathy. Removal and placement into out-of-home care can negatively impact a preschooler's ability to form peer friendships due to the sudden change in their living environment and caregivers. When they are moved between multiple foster homes, **their ability to understand and navigate social interactions can be disrupted.** This instability can create anxiety and insecurity, making it harder for them to feel safe and open up to others. Additionally, out-of-home placement may **limit a preschooler's opportunities to interact regularly with peers in their community of origin,** further



hindering the development of lasting friendships. As a result, they may struggle with social skills like sharing, cooperation, and empathy, which are essential for building and maintaining friendships.

Cultural & Community Fragmentation: Cultural heritage plays a crucial role in binding communities together and shaping a child's sense of identity and belonging, which are key to their social development. **When children are taken away from their homes, they often leave behind their cultural roots,** entering new environments with unfamiliar values and traditions. This disruption can harm community unity by limiting children's chances for meaningful social interactions, involvement, and education within their own cultural community.

Cognitive Development

The cognitive development of preschoolers is characterized by rapid growth in thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities. At this stage, children become more curious about the world and begin to ask numerous "why" and "how" questions as they seek to understand their environment. Their memory and attention span improve, allowing them to engage in more complex tasks and follow multi-step instructions. This is the stage where early numeracy and literacy skills begin to emerge, as children start recognizing letters, numbers, and patterns. Cognitive development during this period sets the foundation for academic learning and critical thinking skills that will be further refined in the school years. The harms of removal to the cognitive development of preschoolers may include, but are not limited to, the following:

Early Learning: The toxic stress caused by separation from their parents and home environments can impair their ability to focus, concentrate, and engage in learning. Emotional distress often disrupts cognitive processes, leading to delays in problem-solving, memory, and critical thinking skills.

Frequent moves between foster homes or institutional care can interrupt early learning experiences, such as exposure to language, numbers, and other foundational concepts. The instability and lack of predictability may make it harder for preschoolers to retain and build on cognitive skills, potentially leading to learning delays or difficulties when they enter formal schooling. Furthermore, the stress from removal can affect brain development, especially in areas related to executive function, leading to long-term challenges in attention, impulse control, and academic performance.



Separation Anxiety: As compared to toddlers, preschoolers have a much better developed understanding of object permanence which means they are aware that their parent still exists when they are out of sight. **However, because they lack a full understanding of time and the predictability of their parents' return, this newfound awareness can trigger and/or intensify separation anxiety.**²³ The child knows the parent is gone but may feel uncertain about when or if they will return, leading to distress. They may go back-and-forth between hope for reunification and despair, often expecting to see their family members again, which can lead to further confusion and heartache.

Court systems has historically struggled to recognize that this upset is due to separation anxiety, often mistakenly linking these "behaviors" to the trauma of abuse or neglect the child endured while with their parent(s). Separation anxiety is NOT a valid reason for reducing the frequency or duration of family time visitation. In fact, the distress of young children experiencing separation anxiety is best alleviated through predictable, quality time with their family.

Understanding of "Foster Care": Preschoolers primarily think in concrete terms, so they may not fully understand why they are in foster care or the long-term implications. Their focus is often on the here and now—who is taking care of them, where they sleep, and how their daily routine is affected. They are likely to view foster care as simply being in a new home with new caregivers, without grasping the legal or social reasons behind the placement. Preschoolers may be confused about why they are no longer living with their biological family. Their thinking is still egocentric, meaning that they have difficulty seeing things from other people's perspectives.²⁴ **They are not able to fully comprehend that the separation is for their safety or well-being, and instead, may blame themselves or feel that their family has abandoned them,** which can lead to feelings of sadness, guilt, or fear.

Understanding of Time: At this age, children are still learning basic concepts related to daily routines, but their understanding of time is still largely event-based (e.g., "after snack time"). A limited understanding of time can significantly affect their experience when being removed at this age. Preschoolers have little grasp of abstract concepts like the future or the duration of events, **making any separation from their primary**

caregivers feel immediate and permanent.²⁵ Without a clear sense of when or if they will return home, the removal can cause intense fear, confusion, and anxiety. Furthermore, preschoolers have a difficult time comprehending the temporary nature of the separation, leading to feelings of abandonment and insecurity.

Racial Identity Formation: The formation of racial identity in children is a multifaceted journey shaped by several factors. By the age of three, children start to notice differences in skin color and other physical traits and can identify and categorize people based on these visible characteristics.²⁶ When children are placed with caregivers from a different racial or ethnic background, it **disrupts their environment and complicates their understanding of social categories like race.**



Since preschoolers learn through modeling and will imitate the behaviors of the household they are living in, removal can result in the loss or abandonment of cultural heritage and traditions, and ultimately identity. This is especially impactful for children who have been in foster care for long periods of time, which is why it is crucial to support positive racial identity development and address internalized racism throughout the entire life of a case.

Genetic mirroring refers to the experience of seeing one's own physical and personality traits reflected in those around them, typically their biological family. **For preschoolers placed in foster families of different cultural or ethnic backgrounds, the lack of genetic mirroring can complicate their understanding and acceptance of their own racial identity.** Young children look to their family members to understand who they are and provide a sense of continuity and stability - which further compounds the trauma of removal and continued separation. Seeing similar traits and behaviors helps preschoolers develop a sense of identity and feel a sense of belonging. When they are forcibly removed from their family, **they can feel isolated or alienated, especially if they do not see themselves reflected in their foster family.**^{27,28}

Hair Care Routines: When a preschooler enters foster care, their hair care routines can be disrupted if caregivers are unfamiliar with the specific needs of their hair type. Proper care of textured or curly hair often involves specialized products and techniques. If these needs are not met, it can lead to physical issues like dryness, breakage, or discomfort. Beyond physical effects, hair care is often tied to cultural identity and self-esteem.²⁹ For a child of color, neglecting or mishandling their hair can impact their sense of belonging and pride in their heritage, contributing to confusion or insecurity about their self-identity as they grow. If a child of color needs to be removed, providing appropriate hair care in foster placements is crucial for supporting a child's emotional and cultural development.

Language Development

The language development of preschoolers advances significantly as their vocabulary expands and their ability to form complex sentences improves. During this stage, children move from using simple sentences to more sophisticated language structures, enabling them to express ideas, ask questions, and engage in conversations. Their

vocabulary grows rapidly, often reaching several thousand words by the end of the preschool years, and they become more adept at understanding and using grammar, such as correct verb tenses and plural forms. This period is critical for building the language foundation necessary for reading, writing, and effective communication in later years.³⁰ The harms of removal to the language development of preschoolers may include, but are not limited to, the following:

Acquisition of Native Language: Preschoolers acquire their native language primarily through exposure and interaction with trusted adults, making parent-child interactions crucial for language development. It is important for professionals within the child dependency system to acknowledge the historical context of the impacts that child separation policies have had on inter-generational Native language acquisition. One of the starkest examples of these policies is the U.S. government's purposeful separation of families to forcibly acculturate Native American children in state- or church-run boarding schools, which ultimately led to the disappearance of many Native American language groups and to radical changes in the groups that survived.

Children learn language by imitating adults ("modeling") and engaging in conversations ("interaction"), where they receive feedback and corrections. **When a child is placed in an out-of-home setting with caregivers who speak a different language, it significantly limits their chances to learn and develop proficiency in their native language.** Inconsistent interactions and limited opportunities for rich native language experiences, such as reading, storytelling, and everyday conversation, can impede a child's linguistic growth. The loss of familiar linguistic interactions can hinder their ability to expand vocabulary, grasp grammar, and develop communication skills. Additionally, if a child is placed in a setting where caregivers have limited time, resources, or willingness to engage them in native language building activities, their development may further stall, or even regress.

When these children return home to their families of origin, they may not sound the same (i.e., accent, vernacular, discussion norms, etc.) or speak the same language as those in their cultural community, which can lead to social isolation and lack of sense of belonging in one's own community.

Asking Questions: Preschoolers are naturally curious and seek stability, so when they are placed into foster care, it is common for them to frequently and repeatedly ask when they will return to their biological family. **These questions typically stem from feelings of confusion, anxiety, and a desire for reassurance and security, as they may not fully understand why they were removed or the duration of their stay in foster care.**

Child dependency courts typically discourage parents from talking with their children about the open case which prevents parents from being able to respond to their preschooler's questions. While well-intentioned, this practice fails to acknowledge that **parental reassurance during times of family separation is a primary pathway for mitigating the negative impacts of the intense grief and loss that preschoolers experience when removed from their parents.** Children may also hear different, often conflicting messages about their family of origin from their out-of-home caregivers. Regardless of accuracy, these stories can be internalized and shape self-identity, self-

esteem, and the child's view of their family and community of origin. Rather than restricting access to information parents, caregivers, and professionals should respond with simple, consistent, honest, and age-appropriate answers that offer comfort while maintaining clarity about the uncertainty of their situation.

Even if children are not verbally expressing their thoughts and feelings, they are actively thinking about their reason for out-of-home placement. Reassuring preschoolers on a consistent basis that their family is alive and cares about them can provide great comfort to children in these situations. Helping preschoolers navigate the difficult questions around foster care with patience and empathy is key to fostering a sense of safety and stability in their new environment. Books like *You Weren't with Me* by Chandra Ghosh Ippen provide stories for families that use age-appropriate language and depictions to help young children understand their feelings around difficult family separations.

Language Skills: The trauma and stress associated with removal can lead to emotional distress, which may reduce a child's willingness to engage in conversation or express themselves verbally.³¹ This emotional impact can hinder their ability to practice language skills, resulting in delays in vocabulary development, sentence structure, and overall communication abilities. As a result, preschoolers may struggle with both expressive language (the ability to communicate effectively) and receptive language (the ability to understand spoken language), potentially leading to long-term challenges in literacy and communication skills as they progress into formal schooling.

Conversational Skills: Preschoolers are starting to learn how to participate in conversations through back-and-forth exchanges which includes turn-taking and observing social cues. When a preschooler is removed from their home they are suddenly cut off from these consistent interactions, which can disrupt their ability to practice and refine these essential skills. When they are placed in an unfamiliar environment, preschoolers may experience reduced opportunities for natural, supportive conversations, especially if the child feels too distressed to engage.

Narrative Skills and Storytelling: A key aspect of early language learning in older toddlers is the development of narrative and storytelling skills. Preschoolers are getting better at using language to describe events, express thoughts, and build simple stories, often drawing from their daily experiences and interactions with their family. When a child is removed from their home, the disruption to their environment and the emotional distress that follows can greatly hinder their ability to engage in this kind of imaginative language use. Furthermore, many cultures have a traditional way of storytelling. This is disrupted when a child is placed in the home with caregivers of another culture.

At this age kids are often asked about themselves and their family at preschool, daycare, Early Head Start, etc. Being removed means less access to family history and stories which help inform the child, and therefore others, about themselves. In the absence of having information, children will fill in the gaps using information from other sources, such as from their out-of-home caregivers.

This guide was created through the cross-system work of the [Family Well-Being Community Collaborative's \(FWCC\) Harm of Removal Workgroup.](#)

ENDNOTES

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