

What should a 4-year-old know academically? The checklist

Twenty-four things that are typical by the end of the fourth year. Tick them over a week of ordinary play, not in one sitting. Fourteen ticks and twenty-two ticks are both on schedule; the range at four is wide. Reading words, writing sentences and sums with numbers are not on this list because they are five-year-old skills.

Reading and language

- ☐ Recognises their own first name in print
- ☐ Knows 10 or more letters by name (usually the ones in their name first)
- ☐ Knows the sounds of a few letters (the first sound of their name, m, s, t)
- ☐ Hears rhyme: says whether cat and hat rhyme, or finishes a rhyming line
- ☐ Knows print runs left to right and top to bottom, and carries the story
- ☐ Speaks in sentences of five or more words, understood by adults outside the family
- ☐ Retells a familiar story or the day's events in order
- ☐ Follows a two-step instruction

Maths

- ☐ Counts out loud to 10 reliably, to 20 with prompts
- ☐ Counts a set of up to 5 objects, touching each one once, and says how many
- ☐ Recognises the numerals 1 to 5
- ☐ Says which of two small groups has more, fewer, or the same
- ☐ Names a circle, square, triangle and rectangle
- ☐ Sorts objects by colour, size or shape
- ☐ Continues a simple repeating pattern (red, blue, red, blue)
- ☐ Uses bigger, smaller, taller, longer, heavier correctly

Writing and fine motor

- ☐ Holds a pencil or crayon in a three-finger grip, or is moving toward it
- ☐ Draws a person with head, body, arms and legs; a circle and a cross on request
- ☐ Writes some letters of their name
- ☐ Cuts along a straight line with child scissors

Learning behaviour (what teachers rate first)

- ☐ Sits with one activity for 10 to 15 minutes
- ☐ Takes turns in a game and waits, most of the time
- ☐ Asks for help with words rather than tears, most of the time
- ☐ Separates from a parent for a session without prolonged distress

What to do about the gaps: ten minutes a day

Letters and sounds	Their name on the fridge in magnetic letters; find each letter on cereal boxes; one letter sound a week
Rhyme	Rhyming books; stop before the rhyme so the child says it
Counting objects	Count stairs, grapes, cars; touch each one; ask how many at the end
Numerals	Number magnets 1 to 5; match each to a group of objects
More and less	Two piles of anything: which has more? Then make them the same
Shapes and patterns	Shape hunt in the kitchen; patterns with cutlery, socks, blocks
Pencil grip	Short crayons and chalk force the tripod grip; tweezers and pegs build the hand
Sitting and turn-taking	Board games with turns; one activity to the end, then the next

Typical at 4 vs typical at 5

Letters: some, mostly from their name -> all 26 and most sounds.

Reading: rhyme, first sounds, print awareness -> blends c-a-t, reads a first reader.

Writing: some letters of the name -> writes the name, simple words by sound.

Counting: to 10, to 20 with help; counts 5 objects -> to 100 by ones and tens; counts 20 objects.

Numerals: 1 to 5 -> 0 to 20, written.

Adding: with objects, spoken -> adds and subtracts within 10 with numbers.

Shapes: four basic shapes -> sides and corners; 3D shapes.

If the list is short at four and a half

Fewer than 10 ticks and the preschool has raised it: ask for the free early screening your system offers (Child Find in the US, the health visitor or school nursing service in the UK, the Maternal and Child Health service in Australia).

A hearing or language check solves more academic gaps at four than any tutor. Science with Shobha does not tutor four-year-olds; we start at kindergarten with 30-minute classes and a parent in the room.
sciencewithshobha.com/subjects/kindergarten-math/