

Your Preschooler's Baby Regression

From [Parents Magazine](#)



Colleen Safford's 3-year-old daughter, Orla, had always yearned to be grown up and in control. "She is far more independent than her 5-year-old brother," says Safford, of Chatham, New York. So it came as a bit of a shock when Orla started talking like a baby last December after her new brother was born. She even wanted to pretend-breastfeed. A behavior backslide is actually quite common among preschoolers, particularly when there is a change in routine or a stress such as a new sibling, explains Betsy Brown [Braun](#), a child-development and behavior specialist and the author of *Just Tell Me What to Say*. It can feel frustrating when you've worked hard to help your kid mature. Fortunately, as long as she isn't regressing in [potty training](#) or behaving destructively, acting babyish isn't necessarily a cause for alarm. The trick is to allow your child to explore her need to pretend to be a baby while helping her move through this phase.

Uncover the Urge

As was the case with Orla, baby behavior classically shows up when there is a new sibling on the scene, and it's a call for attention. "The child sees her new brother or sister getting attention for being incapable and cute, and she thinks, 'I'll try that too,'" says Alyson Schafer, psychotherapist and author of *Ain't Misbehavin'*. "Kids try on behaviors and continue them if they get them what they want."

Asking to be cuddled, carried, and taken care of can also simply be a clumsy way of getting reassurance and love. Dealing with all of the expectations of being a so-called "big kid" can be overwhelming at times. "When anxieties and fears arise, it's human nature to want to retreat to the arms, skin, smell, and touch of our loving, protective mother," says Fran Walfish, Psy.D., a child and family psychotherapist and author of *The Self-Aware Parent*.

Listen to His Actions

"Behavior is the language that a preschooler is most fluent in -- it's often his only way of telling you what's going on in his life," explains Nancy S. Buck, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist and author of *Why Do Kids Act That Way?* Most kids this age aren't able to say, "It's been a hard day and I'd like you to baby me so I can feel better." So when your child holds up his arms and says "Uppy," think about what might be triggering it and help him talk about what he's feeling. If you get annoyed

and answer every baby-talk request by saying, "Stop talking like a baby. You're too old for that," you'll make your child feel bad, and you won't uncover the reason he's acting that way, says Braun. Plus, focusing on it may only encourage him to keep going. "In a kid's eyes, negative attention is better than being invisible," says Schafer. A more productive response to "Me want watahh," would be to calmly say, "When you ask me in your 3-year-old voice, I'll be happy to help you."

Schedule Baby Time

Acknowledge your preschooler's need to slip backwards by allowing it at certain times. If she starts crawling around her 8-month-old brother, take note in a nonjudgmental way and let her know that she can have "baby time" with you at a prescribed point in the day. During this time-limited period, you can talk to her in babyese, spoon-feed her, and she can "Goo goo ga ga" to her heart's content," suggests Dr. Walfish. Then when "baby time" is over, let your child know that she needs to be a big girl again.

Spotlight His Abilities

Encourage preschooler behaviors you like. For example, if your little guy wants you to dress him and you know perfectly well that he's able to do it himself, try not to shoo him away by telling him to get his pants on alone; that will make having big-kid capabilities seem like a bummer. Instead, say, "I know you can do that on your own but I'll keep you company." Then compliment him on how well he gets his shirt over his head or coordinates his colors, advises Schafer. He'll learn that he can get your attention and praise by being capable as opposed to helpless.

Reminisce Together

Look back at photos of your preschooler when she was a baby and talk to her about the things you did together then. "This lets your child know, 'I have good memories of you as a baby, you are important to me, and I love you, which is something every child needs to hear each day,'" says Schafer. And don't be afraid to keep some [baby toys](#) and [books](#) in circulation. Not only will these [keepsakes](#) bring up fond memories, but they will also let your preschooler (and you) see how far she's come, says Braun.

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