



COULD / COULDN'T

Past abilities

165

Could and couldn't



We use **could** or **couldn't** + base form to talk about ability in the past. **Could** and **couldn't** are the past forms of **can** and **can't**.

The children **could** speak two languages when they were five.

He **couldn't** see the board because he needed glasses.

We can use **can** to compare a situation or ability in the past with one now.

Max **couldn't** speak French when he was young, but he **can** now.

A few months ago, Irina **couldn't** swim. She **can** now.

Oliver **could** swim very fast when he was little, but he **can't** now.



Complete the dialogue using:

could

couldn't

can

Sue And this is me when I was four.

Mai ¹ Could you swim when you were four?

Sue No, I ² _____, but I ³ _____ now. And you?

Mai Yes, I ⁴ _____. I learnt to swim when I was two.

Sue ⁵ _____ you send emails when you were four?

Mai No, I ⁶ _____. But my brother showed me how to send emails last year.

Sue And how many languages ⁷ _____ you speak when you were four?

Mai Only one. But now I ⁸ _____ speak two!





Look at the list. Complete the sentences with **could** or **couldn't**



Ten years ago ...	
drive a car	✓
use a computer	X
speak Spanish	✓
pitch a tent	X
run ten kilometres	X
light a fire	✓
write computer programs	✓
play the guitar	X
climb trees	✓



- | | |
|----------------|--------------------|
| 1. Yasmin | drive a car. |
| 2. Rob and I | use a computer. |
| 3. Edward | speak Spanish. |
| 4. Ted and Leo | pitch a tent. |
| 5. Lewis | run ten kilometres |
| 6. Kim and I | light a fire |
| 7. Sidney | play the guitar |
| 8. Seb | climb trees |