

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.



4 Circle the correct answer.

- 1 I could / can do gymnastics when I was young.
- 2 Why **couldn't** / **can't** you come to the party? It was great.
- 3 Ethan **can't** / **couldn't** play football because he hasn't got his trainers.
- 4 Dad **couldn't** / **could** drive when he was fourteen, but he **could** / **can** now.
- 5 Leo and Ella **can** / **could** speak French, but they don't speak French very often.
- 6 Grandpa was a swimmer when he was young. He **can't** / **can** swim now, but he **couldn't** / **could** then.
- 7 I've lost my keys. I **can't** / **couldn't** open the door when I got home.

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

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

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

6 Complete the sentences. Use the verbs from the box and **could** or **couldn't**.

ride sit cook eat run play

- 1 Grandpa (✓) could ride a horse when he was young, but he (X) can't now.
- 2 Molly and Gemma (X) _____ the violin last year, but they (✓) _____ now.
- 3 Dad (✓) _____ fast when he was at school, but he (X) _____ now.
- 4 Mum (X) _____ cakes when she was a child, but she (✓) _____ now.
- 5 Grandma (✓) _____ on her hair when she was a girl, but she (X) _____ now.
- 6 Harry (X) _____ apples when he was a baby, but he (✓) _____ now.

7 Look at the table. Write sentences about Jason. Use **could** or **couldn't**.

	When he was five ...	Now, he ...
1 drive a car	X	X
2 play football	X	✓
3 run fast	✓	✓
4 swim	X	✓
5 read	X	✓
6 speak English	X	✓

When Jason was five, ...

- 1 He couldn't drive a car. He can't drive a car now.
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____
- 6 _____

8 Complete the email. Use **can**, **can't**, **could**, **couldn't**, **should** or **shouldn't**.

Hi Penny,

I'm sorry I ¹ couldn't email you yesterday. I was ill so I ² _____ go to school.

Mum said I ³ _____ stay in bed, but I ⁴ _____ sleep so I watched TV. I saw a show about monkeys. They ⁵ _____ climb trees very quickly! I ⁶ _____ climb the big tree in our garden too. Come and visit me at the weekend! Mum says I ⁷ _____ run around too much, but we ⁸ _____ climb the tree!

Write to me soon! Sally