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.

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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 (✗) can't now.
2 Molly and Gemma (✗) _____ the violin last year, but they (✓) _____ now.
3 Dad (✓) _____ fast when he was at school, but he (✗) _____ now.
4 Mum (✗) _____ cakes when she was a child, but she (✓) _____ now.
5 Grandma (✓) _____ on her hair when she was a girl, but she (✗) _____ now.
6 Harry (✗) _____ 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	✗	✗
2 play football	✗	✓
3 run fast	✓	✓
4 swim	✗	✓
5 read	✗	✓
6 speak English	✗	✓

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

LIVEWORKSHEETS