You use **CAN** to describe an ability in the present.

Annie can swim, but she can’t ride a bike.

You can also use **BE ABLE TO** to describe an ability in the present or future.  
(Attention: **CAN** is used much more frequently than **BE ABLE TO** in the present tense)

He’s able to park a car, but he’s not able to drive in traffic yet.

I’ll be able to speak French in a couple of months.

You use either **COULD** or **WAS/WERE ABLE TO** to describe a general ability in the past.

I could swim when I was 5 years old.

My brother was able to drive cars when he was 12 years old.

You must use **WAS/WERE ABLE TO** to describe a special achievement or a single event in the past.

Finally, she was able to visit her birthday place.

You can use either **COULDN’T** or **WASN’T/WEREN’T ABLE TO** for any negative sentence describing past ability.

My friend couldn’t speak Italian.

He wasn’t able to speak Italian.

For forms and tenses other than the present or past, you must use **BE ABLE TO**.

We haven’t been able to play tennis for a long time.

Use **CAN** and **COULD** to say that something is possible, to make guesses and polite requests, to make suggestions, and to ask for and give permission.

Could we use our dictionaries?

Can I have five more minutes to answer this question?

Could you drive me to the hospital, please?

Maybe we could go to San Francisco.

It could rain tomorrow.
1) For a long time, Alec and Iris _________ play tennis together. Alex loves it. Iris has just started taking lessons, but she still _____________ play well.

2) - I heard there was a fire in your building yesterday. Was anyone hurt?
   - No, the firefighters _____________ get everyone out of the building.

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**WRITE SENTENCES USING THE IDEAS IN BRACKETS.**

1) (something your best friend was able to do)
2) (something you have never been able to do)
3) (something you can do very well)

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**WORK WITH A PARTNER. ASK WHAT YOUR PARTNER COULD DO WHEN HE OR SHE WAS 4 YEARS OLD AND WHAT HE OR SHE CAN DO NOW.**

Example: - YOU: Could you draw pictures?
   - Partner: Yes, I could. / No, I couldn't.

1) - ride a horse
2) - use a computer
3) - take photographs
4) - count to a thousand
5) - climb trees

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**COMPLETE THE SENTENCES USING: COULD / COULDN'T / WAS - WERE ABLE TO.**

1 - My uncle was very clever. He __________ speak 4 languages.
2 - My father wasn't at home when I phoned, but I __________ contact him later.
3 - A little boy fell into the river but some men ____________ rescue him.
4 - He had forgotten to bring his camera so he __________ take any photos of the wedding.

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**ANSWERS**

Exercise 1: - 1) couldn't // can't
               - 2) could

Exercise 4: - 1) could
               - 2) was able to
               - 3) were able to
               - 4) couldn't