

The Wonderful Three-Year-Old¹

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Overview

Age three marks an exciting time for both you and your child. At this age, children are full of energy and are very enthusiastic about living. As a parent, you can reinforce this enthusiasm by focusing on your child's positive qualities.

Your child is very curious. He watches and listens to everything that goes on around him. He will ask a lot of questions about things he sees and does not understand. Be patient and take the time to answer his questions. This is how your child learns. When you have a positive attitude about answering questions, you encourage his love of learning.



These are special times to interact with your child. When you explain an idea to him, make eye contact and get down on his physical level. Also, keep your explanation simple. Your three-year-old is

not looking for an in-depth answer. A few words are usually enough to satisfy his curiosity.

As your child grows and learns, his third year will be filled with changes. Here are some ways he will develop physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually.

Physical Development

A three-year-old can move quite well. She can run quickly, jump, kick, swing, and pedal a tricycle. She has good balance and can stand on one foot for a few seconds or carry a drink without spilling it. Make sure to provide a safe environment where your child can exercise and move her large muscles. Take her to the park and encourage her to climb the monkey bars and swing on the swings. Let her play with various toys such as a ball, a tricycle, or a wagon that she can use in active play. Also play active games with her such as catch or follow the leader.

At three, a child uses small muscles more frequently. Your child can scribble with crayons, handle a fork and spoon, and use buttons and zippers. With greater control of her hands, your three-year-old will be able to do more tasks for herself. She will be

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able to feed herself, help dress and undress herself, wash and dry her own hands, and brush her own teeth. Be sure to allow enough time so your child can do things on her own. When she does things on her own, your child will feel successful and competent.



Sometimes your child will become frustrated by what she cannot do. Encourage your child and give her plenty of opportunities to practice. You might even buy or make a toy that helps her practice skills such as using buttons and zippers. As your child succeeds with each task, praise her for a job well done. Try to make your praise specific by describing what you see. For example, say, "You did a great job dressing yourself! You put on your socks and buttoned your shirt and combed your hair."

Social Development

A three-year-old feels a strong need to please his parents, unlike a two-year-old, who often resists. He imitates the way they talk and act and tries to conform to their expectations. Because of a three-year-old's desire to please, he will often be cooperative.

Your child will be very aware of what you and other adults think and say about him. He will understand if you criticize him to someone else. Instead, let him "overhear" you say good things about him to other adults. This is a good way to nurture his self-esteem.

A three-year-old can be lively and talkative. He has his own thoughts and ideas and he enjoys sharing them. When your three-year-old tells you about his experiences, take time to listen to him. Show interest and ask him questions. For example, say, "You saw a dog on your walk with Granddad? What did the dog look like?"

A three-year-old likes to be around other children. He will play alongside other children, using the same toys or participating in the same game. Play time for three-year-olds can lead to fights and tears. A three-year-old can understand the idea of taking turns

and he may understand that other people have feelings. However, because he is self-centered, it is still very difficult for him to share. His lack of social and communication skills might cause him to hit or shove to get what he wants. Monitor your child's play with his playmates. Encourage him to use words instead of hitting to express what he wants.



A three-year-old is naturally self-centered. He truly believes the world revolves around him. However, he is beginning to understand that other people have feelings and needs, too. For example, if you hurt yourself, your child might give you a hug of comfort, or if he hears a baby cry, he might tell you the baby needs you. You can encourage your child's awareness of others' feelings and needs by talking about them. For example, you might say, "Grandma feels sad today. Let's give her a hug." Or if your child asks for more juice, you might say, "Please wait a moment while I finish my cereal."

Emotional Development

A three-year-old can be lively, affectionate, cooperative, and good-humored. Around three-and-a-half, though, she may suddenly become strong-willed and disagreeable. She may become emotionally insecure and anxious. She may seem as if she is trying to go back to being a baby. She may also become very picky and hard-to-please.

One reason that a three-and-a-half-year-old becomes rebellious and insecure is that she is moving towards more independence. She is testing limits to find out who she is and what she can do. However, becoming independent is hard work. It can make a child feel anxious and in need of a lot of encouragement and comfort.

When your child is going through this difficult stage, remember that it is just that, a stage. Things will improve soon. Limit the frequency and duration

of conflicts. Sometimes it is better to overlook certain behaviors (such as whining) and to let him have his way once in a while (for example, if he wants to wear a raggedy pair of pants). In the meantime, it is important to be calm, patient, and loving with your child. Here are a few tips for helping your child through this rough stage:

- Continue to give your child tasks to do each day, but do not ask more of her than is necessary.
- Give clear, simple directions.
- Give choices when possible.

Another reason that a three-year-old may become anxious or irritable is that she has developed a new fear. She may suddenly be afraid of things she was never afraid of before, such as the dark, baths, loud noises, or animals. If your child is afraid of something, acknowledge her fears. Do not dismiss her feelings. Instead, listen to what scares her and reassure her. For example, if your child is scared of the dark, tell her it is okay to be scared and that you will help her get rid of what makes her scared. Look under the bed, look in the closet, even get a bottle of water and squirt out any monsters she believes might be in the room with her. Leave a night light on to reassure her that everything is okay.

Intellectual Development

Around age three, a child's thinking becomes more flexible. He can imagine objects and events, and loves to tell stories and play pretend. Telling stories and playing pretend lets him try out different roles and behaviors. Provide your child with dolls or action figures, animal figures, dress-up clothes, a toy telephone, or any other toys that let him act out scenes. At times he may have difficulties distinguishing fact from fantasy. This is very typical at his age. Avoid dismissing his fears or accusing him of telling tales or lying. Instead, in a calm and loving manner explain what the reality of the situation is.

Also provide your child with paper, crayons, clay, scissors, paste, pegboards, blocks, and other creative materials. With his greater hand-eye coordination, he can really enjoy creative activities such as drawing and building. As your child plays and

creates, show interest in what he is doing. Get down on the floor and have some playtime with him. Do not dominate his play by asking too many questions. Instead, attend to what he is doing by describing and commenting on what he is creating or playing with.

A three-year-old can use simple sentences to make his needs known and share his ideas. New words are interesting to him. He likes to hear them and try to use them. Encourage your child to speak and try new words by listening and responding to him. When he makes a mistake, do not correct him with “no, that's wrong” or “say it this way.” Instead, repeat what your child said pronouncing the words correctly. Your encouragement will motivate your child to keep trying.



You can also expand your child's language abilities by reading. Be aware, your child will probably want you to read his favorite book over and over again. Do so cheerfully. Eventually he will learn to read the book on his own, which is a skill that will serve him his whole life.

Discipline

Parents want what is best for their children. What is best for a three-year-old is to feel secure and learn how to get along with others. You can help your child feel secure and get along with others by providing love and setting reasonable limits.

Make sure the limits are appropriate for your child's abilities. Also, make sure that she understands them.

When your child oversteps the limits, stay calm and positive, and take action. First, focus on the behavior, not the child. Tell your child her misbehavior is unacceptable and explain how it affects others. Then, tell her what behavior you expect instead. Tell her what the consequences will be if she continues to misbehave.

For example, you take your child to the park to play with a friend, and your child starts kicking and throwing sand. Use this moment to teach your child how to behave with others. In a calm voice, tell your child that kicking and throwing sand hurts others and is unacceptable. Tell her that if she is angry with her friend, she can tell her with words. Tell her that if she continues to throw sand and kick, you will remove her from the park. You are giving your child a choice and telling her the consequences of her behavior.



If your child continues to misbehave, keep your word and remove her from the park. Do not wait to remove her until after telling her to stop five or six times. If you do not follow through as you say you will, you teach your child she can get away with unacceptable behavior (such as five or six extra kicks) for a while before you will do anything.

This method of discipline is much more effective than yelling, threatening, or hitting. These tactics may temporarily stop the misbehavior, but the problem will reoccur. When parents set reasonable limits and follow through, children feel more secure. Children who do not face consequences for their actions become spoiled and confused about the world they live in.

Teach your child that she is a loved, very special, and important person, but also teach her that she is not more important than other people.

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