

# child development 3-4 years



This topic is about your three to four year old. In the course of this year children are moving out of babyhood into childhood. They have rich imaginations, they may have strong fears, they love to play and they enjoy physical activity. They are beginning to be more comfortable spending some time away from their usual carers. Sometimes they are timid about trying new things.

Of course all three to four year olds are different and they may develop at different rates. If you are worried about your child's development, or if they can't do things that they used to do for more than a short time, it is important to see your doctor or child health nurse. If there is anything wrong, getting in early will help. Otherwise it is good to know that your child is developing normally in his own special way.

## Social and emotional development

Your three year old is at the very beginning of learning how to get on with others. He can control his strong feelings somewhat better than he did at two but he is still likely to have some tantrums. He starts to understand social skills like sharing and being kind, but he can only practice these skills for a short time when he is feeling safe and happy.

- Three year olds often enjoy being with other children and they now begin to play together more. They are learning that other people are real and have feelings. This means they can be upset when other people are upset.
- Taking turns is a skill that they will learn as they approach four, but if they are upset or worried they will not be able to share their own special things.
- They are starting to be able to wait a short time for what they want, such as 'we will go out after you eat your lunch'.
- Three year olds are less likely than two year olds to have kicking and screaming tantrums. They are eager to please you. With your help they might be able to try something else or wait for a few minutes.
- Your child may still have fears of noises, the dark, animals, monsters etc.

- Three year olds are developing a sense of humour and like to laugh at and repeat silly words and situations.
- They will like to have choices but they usually can cope best if the choice is limited such as 'you can wear your red shoes or your blue ones'.
- They may still need a dummy, blanket or other comforter when tired or away from home.
- They can have very stereotyped ideas of what 'boys' and 'girls' are like, e.g. girls wear pretty dresses and boys are like Superman.
- They are starting to take responsibility for their own toileting.
- They may have accidents (wet pants) during the day and be wet at night.

## Developing understanding

Their own inner world is very powerful for your three to four year old. Sometimes it is difficult for them to sort out what is 'pretend' and what is 'real'. For instance, whether witches really can put a spell on you or whether children can grow wings and fly like the picture in their book. Three year olds do not tell 'lies' as such but sometimes the inside and outside reality gets mixed up. She will love to talk to you about these important things. Never laugh at their confusions, and give them small amounts of simple information when explaining things.

### A three year old

- can now understand that her mind is separate from those of her parents, and that they cannot read her mind
- still does not really understand about things like height and size. She will think that a tall thin glass holds more than a short fat one – so there can be mistakes with pouring
- shows some understanding of time and understands that night follows day
- understands the meaning of tall, short, big and little



- can say whether they are boys and girls and can tell you whether other children are boys or girls, but they don't yet understand that their sex is permanent
- can tell you how old she is
- by the time she is four she may be able to draw a person. Her person will probably have a big round head, with eyes and maybe a mouth and straight out of the head will poke the legs
- a four year old can copy a cross and a square and can build a bridge with three bricks.

## Physical development

In this year children delight in physical activity and will love to run, jump, climb, dance, ride their three-wheeled bikes and swing. They are not very good at pacing themselves and will get tired and cranky if they don't have some quiet activity between their bouts of energetic activity. Of course it is important that they can do these things safely and with supervision.

At three and a half to four they sometimes lose co-ordination and confidence for a time.

- They love to splash and play with water. Some threes are afraid of the pool or sea and others delight in swimming with an adult. (Always supervise children around water.)
- Since balance is better, a three year old can walk along a plank.
- Three year olds can use pedals on a tricycle.
- Three year olds can roll and bounce a ball but catching it is still quite difficult.
- They can throw a ball using shoulders and elbow.
- By four years a child can hold a pencil correctly.
- They can button clothes.
- Between three – four years old children learn to cut with scissors.

## Language

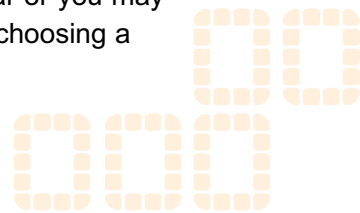
Three year olds are now talking in simple sentences and there is so much going on inside their head that often it seems as though the words can't come out fast enough to describe it all. Three year olds often stutter and stumble when trying to express themselves. It can be exhausting to listen and explain things to your child but exciting to be able to share in their rich imaginings. They will love to be read to and may want the same book over and over again.

- Three year olds get across what they want to say in most situations.
- Some three year olds speak very clearly, while others still use some 'baby talk'.
- Some may stumble over some words but this will probably clear up by itself within the year. (See the topic '**Learning to talk**')
- The average three year old knows more than 1200 words.
- Three year olds can usually understand 'place' words such as – under, on, beside, back, over.
- Three year olds ask questions beginning with 'What', 'Who', 'Where' and 'Why'?
- They can talk about what happened yesterday and about tomorrow.

You can build on what your three year old says to you. Don't correct their unsuccessful efforts at words but respond positively with the correct word in your reply. Try to be patient. Ask them questions. Some children become such enthusiastic talkers that their constant 'what' can become stressful. Most will respond to your request to have some 'quiet time in my own head' – at least for a few minutes!

## Child care and kindergarten

It may be that you begin to use childcare in this year or you may well have used it long before. You will probably be choosing a kindergarten and planning for your child to start.



You may not have many choices but if you have you will be choosing either home or centre-based care, whichever suits you and is available to you. It is most important that, if you have any choice, you are comfortable yourself with the carers and feel that you can talk easily to them, and of course that your child is comfortable and happy.

The way in which you and your child respond to the separation will vary greatly according to your personalities and life experiences but childcare and kindergarten should feel like positive experiences for both you and your child after the initial adjustment period. If it is not, talk to the carers about your concerns.

### **What to watch out for**

When you should have your child checked by a health professional.

- If you can't understand what they say most of the time.
- If they are not using sentences of three or more words.
- If they are not interested in using the toilet or they are frightened of using the toilet.
- If they have big fears that go on for a long time.
- If they can't jump with two feet in place.
- If they don't seem to understand what you say to them.
- If you are worried.

### **What you can do**

- Allow plenty of physical freedom, e.g. riding a tricycle, ball games, learning to swim. However three and four year olds are too young for team or competitive games.
- Allow them as much time as you can to 'get things right' or do it for themselves.

- Give them plenty of warning before they have to finish any activity and pack up their toys, or get ready to leave the house.
- Provide simple games with turns and rules so that your child can begin to learn cooperative games.
- Children of this age enjoy rhythm and you can encourage this by providing music, songs and rhymes, allowing them to bang on lids and singing simple songs with them.
- They love to paint and draw. Provide big pieces of paper, textures or paints. Talk about the story that their drawing tells.
- Provide picture books and story books that can be followed in the pictures and ask questions about the pictures.
- Children may enjoy appropriate TV programs and also enjoy videos that do not go too fast and that can be repeated over and over.
- Provide lots of love, fun, approval and encouragement and begin to set limits that you can and are prepared to enforce.



## Toileting

Some children will be managing toileting at the beginning of their third year and others will not. If children are a perfectionist by nature or 'fussy' about getting things right, they may take longer to develop confidence in managing it themselves. If you have had another baby your toddler may 'go backwards' for a short time in his efforts to toilet himself. If he seems slower than other children you know, **DON'T PANIC**, but if there is tension between you over the issue get support and advice from a health professional early in the piece. See '**Toilet training**'.

### Remember

Each child is unique and develops at her own special rate. Although all children go through more or less the same stages they do it in different ways. Some will learn one new skill very quickly and seem slower at another. Some will seem to stand still with one area of development while they are concentrating on something else. What is important is not how your child compares with others or with a standard for her age, but that she is moving forward at her own pace and that she is well and happy. Providing a caring, encouraging environment with opportunities to explore and try things is the best way for parents to provide the best development opportunities for your children.

However, if your child seems to be much behind others of her age or seems to 'go backwards' for more than a short time, talk it over with a health professional – if there are no problems you will be reassured, if there is a problem getting in early with help is important.

# Summary

## Social and emotional development

During this year children begin to:

- be able to play cooperatively with other children some of the time
- learn about sharing and taking turns (but still cannot manage competitive games)
- separate from parent more easily in familiar surroundings
- become more independent and resistant to help from parents
- show caring for other children who are distressed
- be involved in complicated make believe play.

### There may be a problem if the child:

- does not yet interact with other children or with adults through play
- is excessively aggressive or withdrawn with other children
- plays in repetitious, stereotyped ways.

## Motor development

During this year children usually begin to be able to:

- climb ladders and trees
- stand, walk and run on tiptoes
- ride a tricycle skilfully, turning safely
- stand on one foot for several seconds
- show improving skills in ball games.



### **There may be a problem if a child:**

- is not doing these activities as well as other children of the same age.

### **Daily activities**

During this year children usually begin to be able to:

- eat well with a spoon and fork
- be reliable with toileting, though they may still have 'accidents' when stressed, tired or if they 'forget' to go to the toilet (they may have been too busy). Many will still wet the bed
- enjoy helping adults with daily activities.

### **There may be a problem if the child:**

- does not become toilet trained and reliably dry during the day by the end of this year
- starts wetting again after becoming dry during the day.

### **Speech and language**

During this year children usually begin to be able to:

- talk in complex sentences that are largely grammatically correct
- have speech that is clear enough for most people to understand most of what the child is saying (although there are often sounds which the child cannot yet manage such as s, r, z, th, v, f)
- enjoy stories
- ask lots of questions
- enjoy jokes.

**There may be a problem if the child:**

- still speaks unclearly or is not talking in sentences
- is unable to follow verbal instructions
- is not talking during play.

**For more information contact:**

- Local Community Child Health Nurse
- Local Family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline  
8:00am–8:00pm 7 days a week  
Telephone (08) 9369 1200  
Outside metro area – Freecall 1800 111 546  
[www.ngala.com.au](http://www.ngala.com.au)
- Parent Help Centre/Parenting Line  
Telephone (08) 6279 1200 (24 hr service)  
Outside metro area – Freecall 1800 654 432



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