

Child development (7) - three to four years

Your three to four year old is moving out of babyhood into childhood. They are at the beginning of learning how to get on with others, and can control their feelings better (although they are still likely to have the odd tantrum).

Social and emotional development

Your child is starting to understand social skills like sharing and being kind, but they can only practise these skills for a short time while feeling safe and happy. Characteristics include:

- Three year olds often enjoy being with other children and can now play together more.
- They are learning that other people are real and have real feelings.
- They may still have fears of noises, the dark, animals, monsters and so on.
- Three year olds are developing a sense of humour, and like to laugh at and repeat silly words and situations.
- They may still need a comforter (such as a dummy or favourite blanket) when tired or away from home.
- They can have very stereotyped ideas of what 'boys' and 'girls' are supposed to be like.
- They are starting to take responsibility for their own toileting, but may have accidents 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 distinguish 'real' from 'pretend'. They are not lying on purpose. Characteristics include:

- They show some understanding of time and understand that night follows day.
- They now understand that parents can't read minds.
- By the age of four, they can probably draw a person.
- They still don't really understand things like height and size.

Physical development

In this year, children delight in physical activity, and parental supervision is important. Characteristics include:

- They are not very good at pacing themselves, and will get tired and cranky if not offered enough quiet activities.
- Three year olds can roll and bounce a ball, but catching is still difficult.
- By four years, a child can hold a pencil correctly.
- During this year, they will learn to cut with scissors.

Language

Three year olds are now talking in simple sentences, but they often stutter and stumble over their words. Be patient. Characteristics include:

- Some three year olds speak very clearly, while others still use some 'baby talk'.
- The average three and a half year old knows more than 1,200 words.
- Three year olds ask questions beginning with 'what', 'who', 'where' and 'why'.
- They can talk about yesterday and tomorrow.

Child care and kindergarten

The way in which your child responds to separation will vary greatly according to your personalities and life experiences. However, child care 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.

Toileting

Some children will be managing toileting at the beginning of their third year and others will not. If you have had another baby, your child may regress for a short time in their efforts to toilet themselves. Don't panic, but if there is tension between you over the issue, get support and advice from a health professional.

Suggested activities

Suggestions on encouraging and supporting your child's development include:

- Allow plenty of physical activities.
- Provide simple games with rules so your child can learn the basis of cooperative play.
- Provide music, songs, picture and storybooks, and plenty of opportunities for drawing and painting.
- Children may enjoy appropriate television programs and videotapes.
- Give them lots of love, fun, approval and encouragement.

Signs that suggest a developmental problem

All children are different and develop at different rates, so if your child doesn't do all the things listed in this article, it may be because they are working on some different area of learning and development. However, if your child is very different from other children, or if you are worried about their development or it seems to go backwards, seek the advice of a health professional. Signs that could suggest a developmental problem include:

- Doesn't interact with other children or with adults through play.
- Is excessively aggressive or withdrawn with other children.
- Plays in repetitious, stereotyped ways.
- Is less physically capable than other children of the same age.
- Doesn't become toilet trained and reliably dry during the day by the end of this year.
- Starts wetting again after becoming dry during the day.
- Still speaks unclearly or is not talking in sentences.
- Is unable to follow verbal instructions.
- Is not talking during play.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Maternal and Child Health Line, Victoria (24 hour) Tel. 132 229

Things to remember

- Three year olds often enjoy being with other children and can now play together more.
- They are starting to take responsibility for their own toileting, but may have accidents during the day and be wet at night.
- The average three and a half year old knows more than 1,200 words.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Better Health Channel

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2011 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.