

Developmental Overviews of Three-Year-Olds, Four-Year-Olds, and Five-Year-Olds

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Three-Year-Olds

Three-year-olds have broadened their view of the world. Their ideas of time and place have undergone interesting transformations. They are beginning to grasp the complexities of their social world and to recognize the difference between real and pretend. Typical questions include "Where do birds sleep at night?" "Were there dinosaurs when you were a baby?" and "Are the people on television real or pretend?"

For these children, the past is divided into the immediate past, yesterday, last week and last month, and a long time ago, such as when their parents were young. The future is divided into tomorrow, soon, and "when I get big." Although they may not know the names of the seasons, 3-year-olds are beginning to make the relevant associations. They might remember summer as when it's hot and you go on vacation and fall as when the trees turn color, when you go trick-or-treating, and when you watch football on television.

Space, like time, is also divided into categories. Some places are near and you can walk to them. Some places are too far to walk. Some places are really far away, like Africa and the moon. There are also categories of people, such as children, teenagers, people who are old and work at jobs, and people who are very old and don't do much at all. Things can be living or not living, people and animals can be alive or dead, and things can be real or pretend.

By age 3, the turbulence of the "terrible two's" has passed and a quieter child emerges. The 3-year-old is able to focus on a task for several minutes and to interact in a positive way with other children. By 3 years, children have expanded their repertoire of emotional responses. They can be sad or pensive. They can be jealous, wary, or frightened. They can be contented, jolly, or exuberant. They are also more tuned in to the feelings of others. Pleasing adults is becoming increasingly more important, and receiving praise or affection is becoming a powerful reinforcer. Although 3-year-olds are less apt to throw temper tantrums than 2-year-olds, their behavior can disintegrate when they are tired or hungry.

Four-Year-Olds

Four-year-old children are becoming increasingly aware of themselves as members of a peer group. Much of their day is spent establishing and maintaining their position with peers. Children who are 4 years old use their growing facility with words to praise or to criticize and correct other children, to call attention to their own accomplishments, and to convince a group to adopt their ideas.

Four-year-olds are interested in playing with other children and will use threats and promises to win a friend or gain entry into a group. Remarks like "I'll be your best friend" and "I won't be your friend" are frequently heard in a preschool.

Out on the playground, 4-year-olds require plenty of space. They enjoy all varieties of play and are particularly fond of "monster" and "superhero" play.

Although 4-year-olds are learning to take turns and share toys, arguments over possessions take place continually. Frequently, disputes that begin verbally end with a push, a punch, or a skirmish. For the most part, the children do not really hurt each other in these skirmishes, but providing adult supervision is an important safeguard.

Four-year-olds love to learn new things, like pumping a swing, naming all the dinosaurs, counting up to 20, and playing games on the computer. They believe in what they see, hear, and touch. If a 4-year-old thinks his glass looks like it contains less juice than a friend's, then the friend has more juice, even if the juice was poured from two same-sized cans. If a 4-year-old heard a monster make growling noises under the bed, then there is a monster under the bed, even though his father says it's just his imagination. Four-year-olds are very curious, and their favorite word is likely to be *why*.

Five-Year-Olds

Five-year-olds seem older than 4-year-olds in many ways. Like 4-year-olds, 5-year-olds love to learn new things, but they are likely to be more persistent about mastery. If they are drawing a rainbow, a house, or a self-portrait, they will work for quite a while until it's just the way they want it to look. Like 4-year-olds, 5-year-olds love to pretend, but their pretending is more elaborate. They gather props before the pretending begins, and when they act out a pretend scene, the events take place in a logical sequence. If they are putting on a performance, they will set the stage, make the tickets, and put on their costumes before the performance begins. The performance is likely to include an announcement of what is going to happen, some sort of act or acts, and an elaborate ending with many bows and the expectation of applause.

Five-year-olds are interested in using and interpreting symbols. While some 5-year-olds are faster than others in learning the mechanics of reading and writing, most are serious about wanting to learn. They like to choose from a menu in the restaurant, read the signs on the road, make lists of things they need to buy, and write their names on their books or their drawings. They can work out simple problems in their heads and can grasp the concepts of adding and subtracting, although they

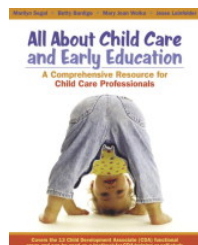
are likely to count on their fingers before they come up with the right answer.

Five-year-olds who have the opportunity to use a computer love interactive programs. They are able to understand and apply the rules of a game and enjoy reading, writing, and number activities where the computer lets them know if they have the right answer. Favorite computer activities include programs that have them solve problems, programs that have them arrange characters on the screen to create their own imaginative stories, and programs that help them make drawings, paintings, birthday cards, and invitations.

Children at this age are quite likely to make playground plans before the day begins. Their choice of friends is likely to be made on the basis of shared interests. Children who like active play will choose to play on the climbing equipment, engage in running and chasing games, play some sort of ball game, or race around the playground on a vehicle. Children who like quieter play are more likely to play in the sand, hunt for bugs or lizards, put on a performance, or huddle with a friend and just talk.

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