

The Growing Years

Child Development Fact Sheet

Bulletin #4245

**3 Years,
6 Months**

How Your Child Thinks

One of the most interesting things about preschool children is how they think about and make sense of the world in which they live. A preschooler's thoughts are clearly not like those of her 9-year-old brother, teenage sister, parent or caregiver.

One characteristic of a preschool child's thinking is that she cannot separate fantasy from reality. If you have a nightmare, you wake up, shake your head, get a drink of water and say to yourself, "Boy, I'm glad that was just a nightmare." Then you go back to sleep. But if your child has a nightmare, she thinks that the dream actually happened. She cannot separate the fantasy from the reality.

Another characteristic of young children's thinking is their belief in "magic." Adults turn a knob, and water flows from a faucet; a switch is flipped, and lights flood a room; buttons are pushed, and Grandma's voice is heard. Since children are not able to understand physics or

chemistry, they think that all of these occur because of magic, especially through the magical powers of adults!

Children also believe that everything in the world is alive, especially if it moves, either because someone pushes, pulls or carries it or because it moves "by itself." For example, you may hear your 3-year-old talking to your car as if it were alive! Or she may become afraid that the curtains fluttering by the open window are going to eat her up. Avoid shaming your child over her beliefs by saying, "You are so silly; the curtains can't hurt you." Simply tell her that the curtains aren't alive, but don't expect her to believe you!



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What Are 3½-Year-Olds Like?

Preschoolers are using their bodies all the time. They enjoy tumbling, jumping from heights and twirling in circles until dizzy. Preschoolers' bodies grow in spurts, then slow down. This means that their food needs change. Later on, we will give you some ideas about making mealtimes fun and healthy.

Emotionally and socially, preschoolers are growing more independent. Your child will play away from you for longer periods now. For example, you may find that 20 minutes has gone by and your child has been playing out in his sandbox by himself. But don't be surprised if your child still needs lots of attention, hugging and comfort. Being independent is hard work, and your child will need to know he is doing a good job.

At 3½, children can think for themselves, express thoughts and ideas, and do many things on their own. They are also beginning to understand other people's feelings. When you get hurt, your child will give you a kiss and say, "It will be all right." You can encourage this concern for others by saying what you feel. Let your child know that everyone has needs, not just him. When he says, "I want some more juice," say, "Please wait a minute while I finish my cereal." Treat your child with patience and respect. He will learn to treat others the same way.

By 3½, children again turn rebellious and become very strong-willed. A strong inner drive prompts their focus on gaining a sense



of control of who they are and what they can do and direct. It is appropriate that they make some decisions for themselves, but your patience and understanding will be challenged as you help them understand why family routines and rules are needed.

Play is Child's Work

Play is the main job of 3-year-olds. They do not care whether it's with boys or girls. They are attracted to water, sand and dirt. A 3-year-old enjoys building blocks, climbing, throwing, puzzles, musical activity and story telling.

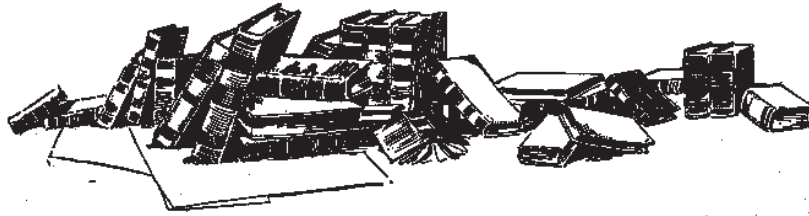
Cognitive Development

A 3- to 4-Year-Old:

- ♦ Knows her or his own age, and will show you the number of fingers before telling you.
- ♦ Can stack blocks or objects in order, by size or by color.
- ♦ Asks "how" or "why" questions.
- ♦ Repeats three numbers in order.
- ♦ Can identify a circle, square and triangle.
- ♦ Begins to understand sentences involving time concepts (past and present).
- ♦ Follows a two-step direction.
- ♦ Understands "if x is true, then y must be true" sentences.
- ♦ Understands when told, "let's pretend."
- ♦ Makes long speeches to self.
- ♦ Can relate two events.

Reading Partners: Parents and Children

"Read it to me just one more time." Is that a familiar statement to parents with young children? We know that childhood is a fleeting moment. It won't be long before that cute preschooler who doesn't say words correctly and spills milk on the floor becomes a young adult.



Because we know that childhood, once past, is gone, we do our best to overcome the everyday demands of work and household and seek ways we can reach out and make contact with our children.

Books provide a way to strengthen the relationship between you and your child. Most children love the feeling of warmth and security that comes from snuggling up by mom or dad while listening to a story. The physical contact, combined with the familiar sound of the parent's voice and the lure of a delightful plot, makes a story special. It may well become one of the most precious memories a child recalls long after adulthood is reached.

Besides the pleasure you and your child experience as you cozy up with a favorite book, reading aloud serves a practical purpose; studies indicate that children who have books read to them at home learn to read more easily than those who don't.

A child whose day includes listening to rhythmic sounds and lively stories is more likely to grow up loving books, and a child who loves books will want to learn to read them.

You can encourage your child to read without spending a lot of time or dollars. Here are a few tips to get you started:

When

- ♦ Model reading. Let your child see you enjoy reading.
- ♦ Start right from the cradle! Reading aloud can help calm a fussing baby or entertain a quiet one, and it can do wonders for you, too.

- ♦ Continue reading aloud even after your child learns to read. Young readers enjoy listening to many books that they can't yet master on their own. But if they are frustrated rather than challenged, put the stories aside for another day.

What

- ♦ Read anything. Books are good, but don't forget signs, menus, mail, billboards, cereal boxes, recipes, calendars, newspapers, magazines, labels and dozens of other everyday items.
- ♦ Use poems. Mother Goose rhymes and other traditional rhymes and songs are especially good for reading aloud because they contain the basic rhythms of the language.
- ♦ Play word games (like rhyming, describing, beginning and ending sounds, opposites, words that mean about the same thing) while in the car, while cleaning, and while eating.
- ♦ Write to read. Leave notes ("I love you!" "I like it when you..." "See you when I get home!"), lists (jobs to do, shopping needs), letters (thank you notes, invitations), happy notes (in lunch boxes, on pillows, on the mirror, in pockets).
- ♦ Have a family reading time, and tape-record favorite stories or rhymes for playback. Hearing their own voices played back gives young children confidence and encourages them to speak.

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How

- ♦ Be familiar with a book before you read it aloud.
- ♦ Make sure the children sit where they can see the book clearly, especially if it's a picture book. Of course, some children just don't like to sit still and listen — they may prefer to draw or play quietly while you read.
- ♦ Allow time to talk about the story. Hurrying through a story can lead your child to view reading as a duty, not a gift. Prepare yourself mentally by thinking of story-time as a time to slow down, learn and be intimate with your child.
- ♦ Read slowly and with expression.
- ♦ Encourage your children to get into the act. Invite them to describe pictures, read bits of text or guess what will happen next. Act out the roles in the story with them, but not with such drama, that you, instead of the book, become the total point of the child's attention. Take your cues from the author through descriptive words and punctuation.
- ♦ Have a puppet "read aloud" from a book, for a change. The puppet can also turn the pages.
- ♦ Expect a lot of questions, especially from young children. Take time to answer these as you go along. If you must ask questions, ask open-ended, imaginative ones that spark curiosity or wonder. Questions such as "I wonder...?" or "What might happen if...?" are likely to trigger a lively discussion. Reading aloud is not a performance or a lesson, it's a way for two or more people to spend time together enjoying a good book.
- ♦ Encourage your children to value their books. Provide a shelf, shoebox, basket or carton with their names on it for safe-keeping. Make homemade book plates for

inside the books to identify their proud owners. On small, square pieces of paper, have them decorate and print a few words as best they can, such as, "This book belongs to Sue."

- ♦ Enlarge the audience with your child's favorite dolls and stuffed animals. These polite listeners enjoy stories told by preschoolers, too.
- ♦ Be ready to listen to your child read to you. Even very small children enjoy making up stories to go with pictures in a book.

Years from now, your children may not remember one Christmas or birthday present from another. What they will remember is your shared time together. Going to the library with your child to check out books is a good place to begin as "reading partners."

Discipline: Teaching Children Social Skills

Discipline is helping a child learn to get along with adults and other children. It also means teaching a child to do what is right and to do so when adults aren't around. It takes patience for parents to discipline children with love and concern.

Listed below are ways to effectively discipline. They will help you and your children live with less stress.

Understanding Misbehavior

Before deciding your child has misbehaved, ask yourself:

- ♦ Is the child aware of the rule? For example, does he know he's to eat food only at the table? Is he aware a rule has been broken? Sometimes a gentle reminder ("Remember, Andy, sit at the table when you eat.") is enough.

- ♦ Is the child so involved in an interesting activity she doesn't hear your request? For example, is she reading a book or watching a favorite television show?
- ♦ Is your child mature enough to follow the rule?
- ♦ Has the child simply forgotten the rule?
- ♦ Is the misbehavior simply a result of the child having a bad day?
- ♦ Why is the child misbehaving? Children misbehave for a variety of reasons. They may do so to gain attention or to express revenge, when they're sick or under emotional stress. Or, they may be feeling inadequate.

You can help meet your child's special needs. Ask your child to help you with certain tasks so she feels valued and knows she can do things. Increase the number of hugs and positive statements you give to him. Spend extra time with your child so she knows she is loved.



Planned Discipline

One way you can avoid misbehavior is to structure the setting for good behavior.

Arrange the environment. The home environment allows children to behave in certain ways. Add a booster seat to the dining room chair to help your child reach his glass of milk without spilling it. Remove breakable items from your toddler's reach to prevent accidents.

You can add to the environment by providing play materials, such as crayons, dress-up clothes, toy cars or play dough. You can also take away from the environment. If you want your child to eat healthy foods at snack time, don't buy cookies and soda.

Child-proof your home. Keep special and dangerous objects out of your child's reach. Keep medicine and cleaners in a locked cupboard.

Provide choices. You can replace one activity or material with another. Your child might want to play with the dough while you are making a pie. Make extra so he can have his own. Or let him play with play dough, a toy rolling pin and a metal pie plate.

It's also important to give children positive choices. "You can either ride your tricycle outside or stay inside and paint. What do you want to do?"

Whenever possible, keep routines consistent. Children gain a sense of security and trust by knowing the sequence of daily events. They can get upset when their daily routine suddenly changes.

Give children notice. Let children know what to expect when changes will take place. If you cancel a trip to Grandma's house, explain why. Ask them to suggest other days for the trip, and let them call Grandma to set up a new date.

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Make statements simple and give one instruction at a time. Children can complete a simple, small task more easily than a large task. Help young children clean their room by stating one request at a time.

1. Put the three books back on the shelf.
2. Put the green toys in this bucket.
3. Put the orange toys in this bucket.
4. Put your clothes on these two hooks.

Set realistic rules of behavior. This involves setting rules that reflect children's physical skills (bladder control, ability to put away toys), mental skills (attention span, memory) and social skills (ability to help and share). The expectations and rules you set for toddlers will differ from those set for older children.

Focus on dos, not don'ts. Children told only "don't" ("don't throw your clothes on the bedroom floor") have a hard time learning what they should be doing. The result may be that one misbehavior is replaced by another (children begin throwing their clothes on the bed). A more effective approach is to tell children clearly what to do ("Hang up your clothes on the hooks in your closet.").

Responding to Misbehavior

Most children will misbehave at some point. When misbehavior occurs, it's helpful to remember to:

Redirect the child's attention. Young children can't understand more than a few basic rules. Talking to them about their behavior often doesn't help. For this reason, it's easier to redirect the infant's or toddler's attention.

Ignore misbehavior. Children will sometimes use profanity or misbehave as a means of getting attention or to shock you. Ignoring the behavior is a good response.



Teach your children how to handle their anger. An angry outburst can offer a time to teach appropriate social skills. You may respond to name calling by calmly saying, "He likes his right name, which is Billy." If two children are fighting over a toy, separate them. Ask them to think of ways to share the toy or redirect them to another activity.

Remove children who are out of control. If your child's anger is out of control, you must take immediate safety steps. Lovingly, but firmly, holding your child is sometimes effective. You may need to remove the child from the room.

Respond to the misbehavior, not the child. When verbally responding to misbehavior, try to criticize the misbehavior. Say, "I'm angry the food is all over the floor," rather than "I'm angry at you for spilling food on the floor."

Use a means of discipline that relates to the misbehavior. If a special toy is broken as a result of rough play, you can explain why it won't be replaced.

Examine the need for a rule. Rules exist for three reasons: to protect children, adults, and animals from harm, to protect belongings, and to help children learn positive ways to get along with others.

Involve preschool and older children in setting limits. Children are more likely to remember and obey rules if they help develop them. Talk to your children about the results of their behavior. Ask them for suggestions. Encourage your children to come up with a rule both you and they can live with.

Consistently enforce rules. Children test parents when they don't consistently enforce rules of behavior.

Model appropriate behavior. Children are quick to imitate or act like adults. It's important for parents to model positive social skills, such as sharing, helping and cooperating. Children will copy these behaviors. Likewise, parents who respond to frustration with angry outbursts and cursing are likely to see these behaviors in their children.

Hitting Children

Most parents don't like to hit their children. They often feel like failures when they do so. Sometimes, however, parents use physical punishment to express their own anger and frustrations with their children's behavior.

A spanking may stop a young child for the moment, but it won't stop the child from doing the same thing later on. He hasn't been taught what to do instead.

When children are hit, they are overwhelmed by feelings of hurt, anger and humiliation. They can't remember why they're being punished.

Research also shows that physical punishment leads to increased aggressive behavior. Adults who received a high amount of physical punishment as children have more problems than adults who weren't hit. These problems include aggression, depression and anxiety.

Most parents don't want their children to learn the lessons of hitting. Hitting tells children that people who love you are likely to hit you, and it's OK to hit people smaller than you.

Most parents who spank their children don't go to the extreme of physically abusing them. Research, however, shows most physical abuse of children begins as ordinary physical punishment. Parents lose control and children are badly hurt.

Remember to use effective means of disciplining to raise responsible, confident and happy children.

Children and TV: Watch It!

Consider these facts:

- ♦ Children spend more time watching TV than any activity except sleeping.
- ♦ Preschoolers spend more time in front of the TV than it takes to get a college degree.
- ♦ By the time they graduate from high school, most children will have spent 15,000 hours watching TV and only 11,000 in school.

You can learn a lot in 15,000 hours. Next to parents, TV is the most important teacher most children will have. Children learn from TV all the time. Programs do not have to be "educational" to teach.

What children learn from the "flickering blue parent" can either interfere with or enhance their growth. The choice is up to you.

Interference with Development

Most programs children watch were meant for adults. But children do not have our broad experience with the real world. For young children, TV is the real world — even when it differs from their own values and experience.

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Children believe what they see on the screen. They cannot always tell the difference between what is real and what is make-believe. This can confuse and mislead children. In most cases, the results from this are more severe. Children have been known to hurt themselves and other people by imitating what they have seen on the TV screen.

TV can hurt children in other ways. We know, for example, that children who watch a lot of TV can become passive. Children need to do things to grow. When they spend a lot of time in front of the TV, children lose chances to be creative, use their minds and develop their motor skills.

Many parents and other experts on children also worry about some of the “hidden” messages of TV. They fear that some programs teach negative attitudes toward women and minorities. They are concerned about the desire for toys and sugared foods that TV commercials create in their children. Plus, the mounting evidence on the relationship between TV violence and violence in our schools and society is disturbing to all.

Fine Tuning Helps

But TV is not all bad. TV can also be a window on the world. It can broaden children’s knowledge and interests by introducing them to:

- ♦ Things they have never seen.
- ♦ Places they have never been.
- ♦ People they have never met.
- ♦ Things they have never done.

TV can also teach children:

- ♦ Skills such as reading, counting, spelling and problem-solving.
- ♦ Healthy attitudes toward themselves and other people.
- ♦ Behaviors we all want our children to have.

Sharing, self-control and courage are among the positive behaviors children have learned from watching TV.

Focusing the Picture

TV is here to stay. It is a powerful means of enriching children’s lives — or stunting their growth. It all depends on how you guide TV viewing in your home.

There is no need to go to the extreme of forbidding any TV viewing in your home. You may decide, though, to cut down on how much TV your children watch. Or, you may want to be more selective about what they watch.

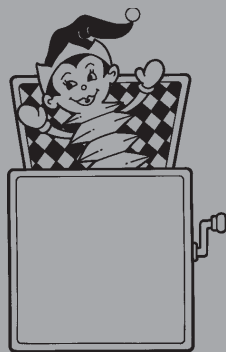
Follow Up TV Viewing with Active Experiences

- ◆ Encourage children to draw or act out what they saw.
- ◆ Have them make up a story about one of their favorite programs. Type it up and let them draw pictures of it.
- ◆ Help them write letters to stars, stations and sponsors, asking questions and telling their opinions.
- ◆ Play games to increase children's language skills. For example, look for a new word each day, or think of programs and characters that begin with different letters.
- ◆ Follow up new information and interests with books and field trips.
- ◆ Think up games like: describing a TV character and having others guess who it is, or imagining what certain characters would do if they were on different programs.
- ◆ With older children, talk about how TV shows are made and produced. If possible, visit a TV studio or arrange for children to take part in a program.
- ◆ Balance the inactivity of TV viewing with movement activities. For instance, try using creative ways to get up and down.

Some suggestions include:

To get up:

- ◆ Shoot up like a fountain.
- ◆ Spring up like a jack-in-the-box.
- ◆ Blow up like a balloon.
- ◆ Explode like a firecracker.
- ◆ Climb up as if from a hole.



To get down:

- ◆ Melt like ice cream.
- ◆ Pour yourself out like water from a pitcher.
- ◆ Be blown like a leaf off a tree.
- ◆ Shrink down like a balloon deflating.
- ◆ Land like a flying saucer.
- ◆ Drip down like a leaky faucet.
- ◆ Drift down like a snowflake.
- ◆ Coil up like a snake.

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The other extreme — using TV as a babysitter — is not a good idea either. Instead, make TV viewing an active experience for your children:

- ♦ Become aware of what your children are watching.
- ♦ Plan your children's viewing.
- ♦ Talk to children about what they watch.
- ♦ Follow up TV viewing with an active experience.

Channeling Your Children's TV Viewing

Television can be a rich learning and social experience for your children. With a little bit of planning, you can change watching television alone into a chance for family members to learn and draw closer together. To add a healthy and human side to TV viewing in your home, try some of the following ideas:



Find Out What Your Children Are Watching

- ♦ Watch programs with your children whenever possible.
- ♦ If you cannot join them, let them know you are there to talk about a program or answer questions.
- ♦ Ask children what they think about different shows and encourage them to ask questions.
- ♦ Do not be afraid to express your own likes and dislikes.
- ♦ Talk about: issues that come up on programs; the difference between make-believe and real life; TV characters and how they're like or unlike people you know; and how violence can hurt people.

Plan Your Children's TV Diet

- ♦ On a daily or weekly basis, go over the TV Guide or a local program listing with your children and select programs for viewing.
- ♦ If your children want to watch a show you think is not right for them, explain what you do not like about it. Be gentle but firm in enforcing your limits.
- ♦ Encourage children to watch a wide range of programs.
- ♦ Provide children with lots of other activities besides watching TV.

Of course, even while building on the benefits of TV, you cannot ignore its negative aspects. When you see something you do not like, write a letter to your local station, a TV network, the press, your congressional representative or a group working for better programming for children. Or start your own group. Many local groups like Action for Children's Television have been able to get better programming for children on both local and national levels.

**Questions Parents Ask:
Should I Be Concerned about
My Child's Tall Tales?**

Don't be upset if your child tells you a crazy story about how he saw a robot eat a tree. Fantasy is fun for 3-year-olds. Some children even include themselves in their stories. This imagination is very real to children. This is what makes them afraid of monsters and the dark. Sometimes, it is hard to tell what is real and what is not. Be patient in explaining the difference to your child.



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Remember, this fact sheet describes a typical child at each age. Each child is special, and each child develops at his or her own pace. Perfectly normal children may do things earlier or later than those described in this fact sheet. If you are concerned about your child's development, see your doctor.

He or She? Him or Her?

This fact sheet gives equal time and space to both sexes. That's why we take turns referring to children as "he" or "she." Please note: when we use he or she, we include all children.

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