



# Understanding Children: The Early Childhood Years (3 To 5 Years of Age)

Family and Consumer Sciences

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The early childhood years are times when young children make great gains in the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive areas. Their feelings, though they change quickly, are very strong. Through observing the young child's behavior and language, it is possible to discover how they feel.

Young children have exciting, vivid imaginations, but often are afraid of the new and unusual. Most children from three to five years of age feel more secure with a daily routine, and most will respond well to praise, encouragement, and consistent guidance.

It is during these early childhood years that the young child will struggle for independence. The child this age will test his abilities, try new challenges and examine new found skills. Children this age feel grown-up and will try to do most anything. They resent being treated like a baby. They are sensitive about mistakes and know when people are laughing at them. They are also more responsive to other children.

## Each Child Is Different

All children are unique little individuals! They may learn the same skills as others their age, but neither at the same time nor with the same interest as a friend next door. What makes the young child develop skills and interests earlier or later than other children of a similar age? That depends on many factors. Heredity can influence skill development. Good nutrition and health are important, too. Encouragement to explore, investigate and ask questions also can have a positive influence on development.

## Physical Development

Physical growth is slower during this period than it was during the infancy and toddler years. The young child loves physical activity, and an increasing skill in



motor activities will make the child feel confident about trying new challenges. Large muscle skills are developed first, but at the end of the early childhood years, children are starting to use their small muscles more often. They run, jump, climb and ride tricycles. They use crayons, pencils, felt markers and scissors.

**Height and Weight.** From three to five years of age children can grow two to three inches per year. An average weight gain of three to five pounds per year can be expected. In addition, adult height can be predicted from measurements of a child's height at three years of age: males are about 53 percent of their adult height, females 57 percent.

**Teeth.** By three years of age, a child can have a complete set of 20 temporary teeth. For some children, as they near five years of age, the loss of the first tooth

## Physical Development: Early Childhood\*

From 3 to 4 years

- Runs around obstacles easily
- Pedals a tricycle
- Throws ball with direction, kicks ball
- Catches large ball when bounced
- Turns a somersault, with help
- Hops and stands on one foot
- Builds three block bridge
- Copies circle and cross
- Cuts with blunt scissors
- Enjoys painting
- Works puzzles with 7-10 pieces
- Acquires ability to feed and dress self with greater skill
- Changes occurring in sleep patterns:
  - 10- 12 hours at night, less napping during the day
- Rest is still important as child can tire easily

From 4 to 5 Years

- Walks up and down stairs with one foot, then the other
- Turns somersault, unassisted
- Climbs ladder and trees
- Bounces large ball
- Good general motor control, though small muscles not as fully developed as large muscles
- Cuts on line
- Prints a few capital letters
- Builds a tower of 10 or more blocks
- Puts on shoes and socks
- Dresses self except for back openings
- Activity level high
- Attention span still short, but increasing

\*This overview should be used only as a general guide to a child's development. Not all children will follow these guidelines exactly.

may occur. Other children will not lose a temporary tooth until the early school years.

**Vision.** Young children are farsighted due to the shape of their eyeball. At five years of age, the young child's vision is not completely mature. Even when a child is six, vision will not be fully developed.

**Food Needs.** A child between the ages of four and five needs between 900-1800 calories a day or about 40

calories per pound of body weight. This is more than half the number of calories required by adult men and women. However, children have less than half the stomach capacity of an adult. Because of both the need for many calories and the small stomach capacity, the young child needs to eat small and frequent meals to have enough energy for growth and activities. Mid-morning and mid-afternoon nutritious snacks are important for the young child's physical development.

**Hand Preference.** From three to four years of age the young child will begin to demonstrate a definite hand preference. The young child's preference for using either the right or left hand should be allowed. Trying to change a child's hand preference can result in stress and unhappiness for the child.

## Emotional Development

The young child's emotions can still be very intense. They react strongly to small events as well as more significant ones. They may demonstrate sympathy for members of their family and yet become angry when they trip over their own toys. Although they show their emotions often, negative moods usually do not last long.

Young children have greater control over their behavior than does the toddler. They are learning to ask for what they want rather than to grab from another child. From three to five years of age, the young child will be maturing and changing in the area of emotional development!

Throughout the day children this age will move back and forth from fantasy to reality. They may not clearly understand what is real and what has been imagined.

**Fears.** Young children are still likely to have some fears. They worry about imaginary dangers such as monsters in the corner of the bedroom. However, they are also able to understand more of what they see and hear and may be afraid of real concerns or dangers. Fears of the dark and/or loud sounds are common. Bad dreams occur at this age and can cause fearfulness. Generally, fears will decrease as the child grows older and as parents support, talk and comfort their young children.

**Anger.** The young child is beginning to learn how to express anger with words. Instead of hitting to show displeasure or anger, the young child will begin to use words (*I don't like that!*). Although young children are learning to react to anger more appropriately, they may still resort to more immature behavior when they are frustrated, tired, ill, or stressed.

**Quarreling.** Quarreling among preschoolers is

### Emotional Development: Early Childhood\*

From 3 to 4 Years     Able to accept necessary limits much of the Time  
 Wants adult's approval  
 Shows fatigue by being irritable or restless  
 Needs reassurances from adults  
 Begins to use words to express anger, though may still express anger by hitting or kicking  
 Imagines that there are "monsters"  
 Often cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality

From 4 to 5 Years     Continues seeking adult's approval, though less often  
 Seeks peer approval  
 More able to talk about anger when approached  
 Begins to criticize self  
 Eager to carry some responsibility  
 Noisy and vigorous during play  
 Individuality and lasting traits becoming apparent  
 Can cooperate and take turns  
 May have nightmares  
 Sometimes fears monsters or other fantasies  
 Begins to distinguish fantasy from reality

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common. Their better developed emotional controls and thinking abilities mean they are more capable than toddlers of playing together for longer periods of time. They will want to be the fastest, the biggest, the "first" at most everything they do. Social interactions can result in conflicts as they learn the give and take of building friendships and playing together.

**Curiosity.** The young child is able to understand a great deal about the world and how objects feel, move, and are put together. They question everything and want to know why, why, why? This constant curiosity to understand and discover is important for children as they gain skill in playing together.

Parents can best help the young child to grow emotionally by offering encouragement as well as opportunity for exploring and being with other children. Setting limits, demonstrating ways to *talk* about how we feel, and occasional hugs and reinforcement will be important to young children as they continue to develop an understanding for their feelings and behaviors.

### Social Development

The young child will gain in ability to cooperate, follow simple rules and take turns. These social skills will evolve during the early childhood years and will help the child to better interact with other children. From three to five years of age the child becomes more social,

### Social Development: Early Childhood\*

From 3 to 4 Years     Likes to be close to mother, but father is increasingly important  
 Imitative in language, manners and habits  
 Begins to learn what is acceptable behavior and what is not  
 Asks countless questions  
 Uses toilet independently  
 Can wash and dry hands  
 Answers telephone  
 Joins in play with other children  
 Understands the meaning of taking turns but may have difficulty sharing  
 Plays alone for short periods of time (15 to 20 minutes)  
 May have imaginary playmate(s)

From 4 to 5 Years     Uses language well  
 Enjoy pretending (dramatic play)  
 Can wash, dress, eat, and use toilet but may need occasional help  
 Interested in group activity  
 Likes to set and clear table  
 Plays and interacts with other children  
 Can talk well on telephone  
 Can cooperate and take turns  
 Shows interest in sex differences

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choosing to play with other children, and not just to sit beside them.

**Relationships with Adults.** Young children will be less dependent upon adults for security and will spend less time near them. Children this age will pursue projects and their own ideas more often. Although young children show greater independence from adults, they still need adult approval occasionally.

**Relationships with Peers.** Playmates are very important to the young child. Children want other children to like them. They enjoy spending much of their time with one or several playmates. Young children and their friends can share, organize simple games, and influence the play of others.

**Identity.** A sense of identity is forming at this time in a child's life. By the age of three, a young girl is gaining awareness of the fact that she is female. At the same time a young boy is becoming aware of the fact that he will grow up to be a man. Young children will watch their parents to learn what it is to be a man and a woman. If children at this age see parents treating others in a caring and considerate way, then they will believe that is the way to treat people. Both boys and girls this age begin to think about what they can or will do as they grow older. They are beginning to form an identity of who they are and how they will relate to others.

**Play.** Play is important in the young child's life. It is through play that children learn about the world and about relationships. Through play activities the young child can learn to solve problems, lessen fears, and use

objects or tools. One of the young child's favorite activities involves fantasy play. Through fantasy play children can begin to explore roles and behaviors of specific people (i.e., a firefighter). They can develop ideas and language skills related to different topics (i.e., being fish in an aquarium), too. Play is time consuming, but most enjoyed when other children are present.

During the early childhood years, the young child will be trying to feel secure in his ability to do things. The young child will look to others to gain an understanding for how tasks are to be done. Young children must feel good about their ideas and accomplishments. They will need praise from important people, especially their parents, to feel that their ideas are worthy.

When young children feel they are capable of doing things on their own, they will try new activities. In this way, social skills will be gained, as well as abilities in different types of tasks.

## Cognitive Development

Cognitive development means the ability to think about and understand the world. During the early childhood years the child makes many gains in this area of development. The young child will become more competent in learning and will become more able to understand such ideas as age, time, and space.

At three years of age the young child is able to use words, numbers and mental pictures for the objects which are remembered. This ability increases during the next several years. Additional characteristics of the young child's thinking include deferred imitation, egocentric thought, animistic thought, and conservation.

**Deferred Imitation.** Deferred imitation is when the young child is able to see something, remember it, and later, when it is no longer seen, to imitate the activity. An example is when a child sees his father shaving. Then later in the day, he pretends to "shave". The young child is copying or imitating a behavior long after having seen it.

**Egocentric Thought.** Egocentric thought is when young children see something from their own viewpoint. It is when children assume that others know what they are thinking. Thinking that mother should "*know what my head is saying*" even though no words are spoken is an example of egocentric thought.

**Animistic Thought.** Animistic thought means giving life to lifeless objects. To the young child, objects seem to be alive if they move or have a use known to the

## Cognitive Development: Early Childhood\*

**From 3 to 4 Years**

- Knows own age and will show number of fingers before telling verbally
- Intentionally stacks blocks or objects in order, size, or by color
- Asks “how” or “why” questions
- Repeats three numbers in order
- Can identify circle, square, and triangle
- Begins to understand sentences involving time concepts (past & present)
- Follows a two-step direction
- Understands relationships expressed by if/then sentences
- Understands when told, “let’s pretend”
- Talks to self in monologue
- Can relate two events

**From 4 to 5 Years**

- Points to and names four to six colors
- Matches pictures of familiar objects
- Draws, names and describes picture
- Counts and touches four or more objects
- “Reads” pictures
- Likes to finish activities
- Interested in death
- Can tell likenesses and differences in pictures
- Listens to long stories but may misunderstand the facts
- Begins to distinguish between fact and fantasy
- Tells tall tales, brags, compliments self
- Tattles, alibis, calls names
- Asks when, how, why questions
- Plays with words (creates own rhyming words)

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child. An example is when a child searches for a lost toy bear and states, “*He will be frightened to sleep alone tonight.*” Another example is when the young child states that a house is “*alive*” because people live in it.

**Conservation.** Conservation is the ability to recognize that two equal amounts of something remain equal even if one is rearranged (as long as nothing is added to or taken from the items). An example is a child who watches a friend take two small balls of clay, divide one into four smaller balls and then say, “*There is more clay here!*” (when looking at the four smaller balls). This ability to understand that the amount remains the same although the size changes is often lacking in the thinking abilities of young children.

Although the thinking of children during the early childhood years is different from adults, a change can be noted in how children understand and describe their ideas. They are remembering and using their knowledge to understand and think about their world.

## Language Development

During the early childhood years most children are enthusiastic talkers. They are interested in everything and have many questions. The most frequent word spoken by some young children is the word “*why*”?

Most of the child’s speech is self-centered. The young child expresses wishes, needs, and experiences without thinking about the effect on others. This does not mean that the preschooler is selfish, but that children cannot consider other people’s feelings. This will begin to change as the child grows closer to 5 or 6 years of age.

Some of the characteristics of children's language during these years are as follows:

- Speech is becoming more grammatically correct, but some errors are common!
- Children's sentences average between 5 and 6 words.
- Verbs are used more than nouns.
- Children ask many questions and can follow simple directions.
- The use of plurals and the past tense is more common.
- I, you and me are used correctly.
- Children understand and use prepositions like over, under, in, on, and behind.

During the early childhood years the child will have a vocabulary of 1,500 to 2,000 words. Many of these words will be spoken as needed. Some words may continue to be difficult for the child to speak; for example, "wove" for "love." Difficult speech sounds for some five years olds are t, v, l, th, j, z, and zh (as in measure).

By the age of five the young child is speaking clearly enough for strangers to understand. Your child may not have perfected the use of all words and certain sounds at this point. It may take months for him to perfect the use of some words and sounds, which may be more difficult to pronounce.

Stuttering may occur as children try to speak quickly. It is usually outgrown during this period, but from time to time may reoccur. During the early childhood years some children will stutter more frequently when they are excited, when a special holiday is approaching, or when they are stressed or anxious about something.

## References

For more information on the development of children during the early childhood years, contact your public library for books on the subject. One of the following references may be of interest (others are also available!):

- Dyer, W. W. (1997). What do you really want from your children? New York: Avon Books.
- Shelov, S.P. (1998). Caring for your baby and young child birth to age five. New York: Bantam Books.
- Spock, B., Parker, S., Parker, S. (1998). Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care. 7th Edition. New York: F.P. Dutton.

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