



Understanding Children: The Early Childhood Years (Three to Five Years of age)

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The early childhood years are times when 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 children's behavior and language, it is usually 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 will respond well to praise, encouragement and consistent guidance.

It is during these early childhood years that a child struggles for independence. Children this age test their abilities, try new challenges and examine newfound skills. They tend to 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.

Each Child Is Different

All children are unique little individuals! They may learn the same skills as others their age, but not 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 is during the infancy and toddler years. A



child loves physical activity, and an increasing skill in motor activities makes 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. By three years of age, the average child is 37 1/2 inches tall and weighs almost 32 pounds. By five years of age, an average child is 43 1/2 inches tall and weighs about 41 pounds. At five years of age, height can range from 40 to 47 inches and weight can range from 34 to 52 pounds.

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 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 child's vision is not completely mature. Even when a child is six, vision may not be fully developed.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT: EARLY CHILDHOOD*	
From 3 to 4 years	Runs around obstacles easily Pedals a tricycle Throws ball with direction Catches large ball when bounced Turns a somersault, with help Builds three block bridge Copies circle and cross Cuts with blunt scissors Enjoys painting Works puzzles with seven to 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 tires easily
From 4 to 5 Years	Walks up and down stairs (unassisted), altering feet 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

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Food Needs. A five-year-old child needs about 1,700 calories each day. This is more than half the number of calories required by adult men and women. However, a child has 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, but

more frequent, meals to have enough energy for growth and activities. Mid-morning and mid-afternoon nutritious snacks are important for the child's physical development.

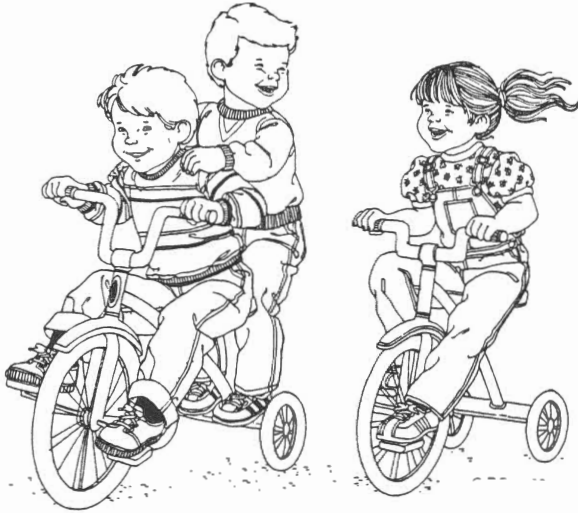
Hand Preference. From three to four years of age, the young child will begin to demonstrate a definite hand preference. The child's preference for using either the right or left hand should be allowed. Attempts to change a child's hand preference can result in stress and unhappiness.

Emotional Development

Young children's emotions can still be very intense. Children 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.

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
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

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

Fears. Young children are still likely to have some fears. They worry over 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. The understanding of what is real and what is fantasy is still not definite. 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 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 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 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 skills 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 are 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 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, choosing to play with other children, and not just to sit beside them.

Relationships with Adults. Young children gradually become less dependent upon adults for security and spend less time near them. Children this age 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.

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 learns 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 begin to explore roles and behaviors of specific people (i.e., a fireman). They also develop ideas and language skills related to different topics (i.e., being a fish in an aquarium). Play is time consuming but is most enjoyed when other children are present.

During the early childhood years, the young

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: EARLY CHILDHOOD*	
From 3 to 4 Years	<p>Likes to be close to mother, but father is increasingly important</p> <p>Imitative in language, manners and habits</p> <p>Begins to learn what is acceptable behavior and what is not</p> <p>Asks countless questions</p> <p>Uses toilet independently</p> <p>Can wash and dry hands</p> <p>Answers telephone</p> <p>Joins in play with other children</p> <p>Understands the meaning of taking turns but may have difficulty sharing</p> <p>Plays alone for short periods of time (15 to 20 minutes)</p> <p>May have imaginary playmate(s)</p>
From 4 to 5 Years	<p>Uses language well</p> <p>Enjoys pretending (dramatic play)</p> <p>Can wash, dress, eat and use toilet but may need occasional help</p> <p>Interested in group activity</p> <p>Likes to set and clear table</p> <p>Plays and interacts with other children</p> <p>Can talk well on telephone</p> <p>Can cooperate and take turns</p> <p>Shows interest in sex differences</p>

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child tries to feel secure in his ability to do things. The child looks to others to gain an understanding for how tasks are completed. Young children must feel good about their ideas and accomplishments. They 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 try new activities. In this way, social skills are gained, as well as abilities in different types of tasks.

Cognitive Development

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

At three years of age, the 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 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 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 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

**COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT:
EARLY CHILDHOOD***

<p>From 3 to 4 Years</p>	<p>Knows own age and will show number of fingers before telling verbally</p> <p>Intentionally stacks blocks or objects in order, size or by color</p> <p>Asks "how" or "why" questions</p> <p>Repeats three numbers in order</p> <p>Can identify circle, square and triangle</p> <p>Begins to understand sentences involving time concepts (past & present)</p> <p>Follows a two-step direction</p> <p>Understands relationships expressed by if/then sentences</p> <p>Understands when told, "let's pretend"</p> <p>Talks to self in monologue</p> <p>Can relate two events</p>
<p>From 4 to 5 Years</p>	<p>Points to and names four to six colors</p> <p>Matches pictures of familiar objects</p> <p>Draws, names and describes picture</p> <p>Counts and touches four or more objects</p> <p>"Reads" pictures</p> <p>Likes to finish activities</p> <p>Interested in death</p> <p>Can tell likenesses and differences in pictures</p> <p>Listens to long stories but may misunderstand the facts</p> <p>Begins to distinguish between fact and fantasy</p> <p>Tells tall tales, brags, compliments self</p> <p>Tattles, alibis, calls names</p> <p>Asks when, how, why questions</p> <p>Plays with words (creates own rhyming words)</p>

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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 affect 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 five or six years of age.

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

- Speech becomes more grammatically correct, but some errors are common!
- Children's sentences average between five and six 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 are 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, zh (as in measure).

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 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!):

Bettelheim, B. (1988). *A Good Enough Parent: A Book on Child-Rearing*. New York: Vintage Books, Inc.

Nelsen, J., Erewim, C., and Duffy, R. (1995). *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers*. Rocklin, California: Prima Publishers.

Spock, B. and Rothenberg, M. (1985). *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Wessel M. A. (1987). *Parent's Book for Raising a Healthy Child*. New York: Ballantine Books.