

Thoughtful Threes

Three is a **social age**! The three-year-old becomes more and more involved in play with other children. She is often openly affectionate to children and adults alike, and may delight in acts of kindness, such as picking flowers for the teacher or drawing a picture for a special friend. She still has trouble understanding the point of view of others, though, so conflicts related to turn-taking and leadership roles are common. The three-year-old also struggles to understand the difference between accidental and “on-purpose” events; her feelings may be deeply hurt if a classmate hurts her unintentionally. It is not uncommon to hear a three-year-old yell at a stray toy for “making her” trip!

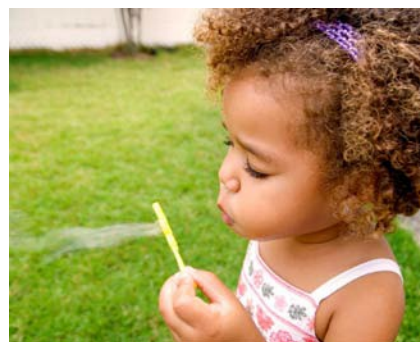
Three-year-olds **thrive on routine**, and may become flustered if things don’t happen in the usual way. They experience a wide spectrum of intense emotions, and can swing from one emotion to another quickly. She lives very much “in the now” – the wants, needs, and events of the moment govern her actions, and she may not be able to focus on benefits and consequences down the road.



Strong attachments to favorite toys have developed, and the three-year-old is often an “expert” on a favorite topic, such as trains, dinosaurs, or princesses. **Pretend play** continues to be a favorite pastime. Popular themes include mothers/fathers and babies and “puppies and kitties”. The three-year-old thrives on **repetition**, often repeating the same pretend games day after day, asking to hear a favorite book over and over again, and drawing stacks of similar pictures. Puzzles, matching games, and peg boards are often popular. She beams with pride after mastering a challenging task!

Physical strength and coordination continue to grow. The three-year-old can be a **risk taker** whose confidence exceeds her competence. **Close supervision** is critical for ensuring safe active play. Throwing and kicking balls, pedaling tricycles, climbing and sliding are favorite playground pastimes. Small motor skills are growing, too. When using crayons, scribbles often give way to very deliberate marks, such as lines and circles. Soon, self-portraits and other drawings emerge.

The three-year-old is **eager to talk** about a wide range of topics and is often **full of questions**. Five and six word sentences are common during the middle and end of this year, and she continues to master the basic rules of grammar. Favorite books include repetitive text, and the child joins in with gusto during favorite parts. She often enjoys paging through familiar books, retelling the story aloud. She also **tells her own, unique stories**, beginning with very simple single sentence stories and progressing to longer, more complicated tales – “and then... and then... and then...”!



Responding to three-year-olds

- Provide support as children begin working and playing with one another. They will continue to need your guidance throughout this year, and can learn much as you role model social behavior.
- Validate the feelings of the emotional three, and remember that events that seem small to you may be monumental to her! Celebrate her accomplishments, and help her seek solutions to problems.
- Offer a wide variety of materials to encourage sorting and classifying. The three-year-old enjoys exploring natural materials, such as seashells and stones.
- Create a library of favorite books, and share them often with individuals or small groups of children. Seek books with a repetitive story line, and encourage the child to join in telling the story.
- Play-dough and clay are popular with three-year-olds, as are finger paint and tempera paint. Encourage open-ended, process-oriented use of these materials.
- Offer an array of fine motor materials, such as puzzles, lacing and linking activities, and simple building toys. Sort and organize materials to help children be successful, and consider rotating materials to maintain interest.
- Create warm, cheerful rituals for daily tasks such as putting away toys, washing hands, and preparing for nap. Songs and games help smooth transitions while accommodating the three-year-old's desire for familiar routines.
- Take time to listen to the three-year-old's stories, and to talk with her about her favorite topics. Encourage sequencing and recollection skills as you discuss events from the recent past, such as a cooking project from earlier in the day.
- Children are developing stronger interests, and are often interested in the same topic for hours, days, or even weeks. Consider allowing children's questions, ideas, and topics of play to guide classroom planning. For example, children who race to the playground fence in eager anticipation of the weekly arrival of the trash truck may delight in sharing books about big vehicles, playing with toy trucks during block play, and having a chance to see community helper vehicles "up close and personal" through a field trip or special guest.

