

YOUR WONDERFUL THREE (AND FOUR) YEAR OLD

Your 3 year old has entered the wonderful world of language and magical thinking that allows him to explore his world through the use of words, play, and fantasy. He will be developing his view of himself, his sexuality, friendships, and family relationships. He will be learning how to adjust his behavior so it is appropriate for different setting. This means that it is very important that you, as his parent, help him learn right from wrong, and help him control his actions even when his feelings seem out of control.

NUTRITION

Three year olds thrive on routine and will probably want to eat the same foods over and over. Most parents have heard their child ask for macaroni and cheese for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. That is why the book "Bread and Jam for Frances" was written! (Your three year old will probably enjoy reading this book and will be able to identify herself in the story.) Meal times should be fun and relaxing, so remember that it is your responsibility as parents to work hard, buy and prepare the food, and offer it to your child. It is your child's responsibility to decide whether or not to eat. You can choose to accommodate your child's wishes for mac and cheese at every meal, but should also provide other nutritional foods she could choose. Some helpful hints:

1. Try to offer a fruit or vegetable at each meal. Some children will enjoy vegetables if they can "dip" the carrot into something like a fat-free dressing, hummus, or yogurt.
2. Limit milk to 16 ounces a day
3. Limit juice to 4 ounces a day. Instead of taking juice with you on trips, bring small containers of water – it is cheaper and much better for your child.
4. Limit high saturated fat, high calorie snack foods. Do not purchase chips, sodas, cookies, candy, and cupcakes so the food just will not be available in your home.
5. Let your child see you making healthy food choices – and she will begin to copy you.
6. Let your child help you prepare food. He is much more likely to try food if he has helped prepare it. Three year olds can be taught how to wash fruit and vegetables, grate cheese, chop soft foods, stir and mix and measure.
7. Experiment with new foods, new recipes. Use your imagination to draw faces on sandwiches or cut food into fancy shapes.
8. Children will often eat better and try new foods when around other children – i.e. daycare.
9. Set an example with your table manners.
10. Do not use desserts as a bribe or reward for eating.
11. Do not beg or force your child to eat or try new foods. Do not get into arguments about what foods your child eats.

Meal times should be fun times for the family to share together. Try to eat together as a family at least once a day, and use this time to talk about your day, share your values, and "connect".

DENTAL

Your child should have had a dental visit by now. Pediatric dentists make dental visits fun for children, so do not let your own fears interfere with your child's experience. If you need a referral to a pediatric dentist, please talk with your pediatrician. Make sure you are brushing your child's teeth after every meal and especially at night before bedtime.

Oral habits like pacifiers and thumb sucking can begin to cause malocclusion of teeth at this age. If you can encourage your child to limit these behaviors to a certain time / place (like in the bedroom, at bedtime), it will help your child discontinue the habit.

TOILETING

Approximately 75% of children have attained daytime control of their urine and bowel movements by this age, but 25% of children are still not interested in using the toilet. If your child is resisting using the toilet, remember that this is one area of her life that she alone can control. You can never force your child to use the toilet – so it is best to just stop trying! For more information, please talk with your pediatrician.

Even children who are dry during the day time may have accidents, wetting the bed at night. He may become very upset when he realizes that he has had an accident. You can help by reassuring him and telling him it happened because his body is still learning and growing.

SEXUALITY

Children in the preschool years become interested in their bodily functions, their toileting behaviors and their sexuality. This is the age when children often “play doctor” with other children to see what children of the opposite sex look like. It is important that you, as parents, understand that your child is learning and exploring his environment. She is beginning to understand that there are differences between people, including differences in height, weight, race, and gender. As your child realizes people are different, he will learn that he is a unique individual. You hopefully feel comfortable with your own sexuality so that you will be able to talk with your child in a relaxed manner about their bodies and their privacy.

You may need to set limits on your child’s sexual exploration. Explain that private areas (those parts of the body covered by underwear or bathing suits) are personal and should not be touched by others. (It is helpful if you talk with your child about exceptions to this rule – such as when she comes to the doctor’s office for an examination.) Your child may masturbate as he discovers touching his body can be pleasurable. Calmly explain that this behavior is personal and should be limited to places that are private, such as the child’s bedroom.

SAFETY

Your 3 year old can begin learning skills that help keep her safe. Your child can:

1. Learn her first and last name
2. Begin learning his address and telephone number. (If your child can memorize the alphabet and songs, your child can learn these important facts.)
3. Learn who the safe people are that she can go to for help. (People in uniforms, people with name badges, people working at cash registers, mothers with babies are all people that your child can seek out if she is separated from you.) Talk with her about what she would do if you were both in a store and she could not see you. Point out the people she can go to for help.
4. Use a helmet if riding a tricycle or scooter
5. Always buckle up in a car seat when riding in the car.

You and your child should always feel safe at home. If you are concerned about your personal safety, please talk with your pediatrician.

FEARS

Three year olds often develop new fears. The two year old is often afraid of loud noises, strangers, separation from parents, and the dark, while three year olds are often afraid of things that “might” happen. So your child might develop a few of imaginary creatures / monsters, and might become afraid of being harmed by storms, other people, car accidents. Nightmares are often the child’s way of working through fears, and fears can also be demonstrated through a child’s play. Your child wants to know that you are there to protect him, so please acknowledge your child’s fear and reassure him that you will be there to keep him safe. “I see you are afraid of the thunderstorm. Loud noises can be frightening, but we are safe in our home.” During times when your child is experiencing increased fears, expect that she might regress in her behavior – or act younger than she normally would.

Fairy tales and stories that allow children to work through their fears are fine to read to children, provided that the story ends with the child being safe and protected by the adults in the story. However, children should not be exposed to visual images that are frightening. This means that television and video games should be limited. Parents – be careful of watching violent television (even news stories) when your child is in the room.

LANGUAGE

Your child will be rapidly expanding his vocabulary. As he does so, he may have periods of stuttering. If this happens, please call your pediatrician for more information. Help your child use her language to describe her emotions – her excitement, anxiety, and fears. If she has words to use, she may be able to better control her behavior.

This is the time that children begin asking difficult questions and often embarrass their parents with what they say. “Why is that lady fat?” or “Why is she in a wheelchair?” are common questions. Be prepared to answer questions like this by thinking ahead about your values. You can share with your child that people are created differently, that each person is unique – but children will often pursue these questions and shatter your comfort level. Children may also begin asking questions about life and death, so parents may find they need to return to their religious institutions to help them answer these difficult questions.

DISCIPLINE / TEACHING YOUR CHILD

Now that your child is older and has better language skills, you can add new techniques into your “teaching tool kit”. Discipline means “to disciple” or “teach” – and you will be teaching your child which behaviors are acceptable and which are not. Remember that preschool children learn best when the consequence for their behavior (positive or negative) happens immediately. You can try the following:

1. Logical consequences
This means that the “punishment fits the crime”. For example, if your child has used crayons to mark on the wall, you take the crayons away for the rest of the day. You could also have your child clean the wall.
2. Natural consequences
This means that the consequence would happen if you did not intervene. For example, your child goes outdoors without her coat and becomes cold. She learns to listen to you when you suggest she wears a coat. In this situation, you, as the child’s parent, have to be willing to appear as an “uncaring” parent to those other parents whose children are wearing coats.
3. Verbal consequences
As your child is learning there are consequences to his behavior, you can also use this concept as you talk with your child. “If you get dressed quickly, then I will have time to read you a story before we leave.” “If you use your quiet indoor voice, I can hear you better.” “If you hit your brother, you will sit in time out.”
4. Reward systems
Preschool children usually respond well to a reward system, and there are many different ways to use rewards. The reward can be words of praise, a smile, time with parents, or a physical item such as a sticker, pennies, a small candy. Reward systems work best when:
 - a. You are working on one specific behavior, like saying “please” or getting dressed in the morning
 - b. You provide the reward immediately. “You said ‘please’ before you asked, so here is your sticker”
 - c. The reward is something the child enjoys and will work to earn it
 - d. You do not ask the child to do several things in order to earn the reward. Do not make it too hard.
 - e. As your child gets older, you can teach your child “delayed gratification” by providing a slightly larger reward the child can work for by earning several smaller rewards. For example, if your child gets dressed every morning for five mornings, and has earned five sticker, he might earn a tiny toy, a trip to the library or story time with parents.
5. Time out. If you have not been using time out, you may find this is a wonderful teaching tool that helps your child learn to control her own behavior. See the “Time out” handout.

Children need to experience frustration as it helps them learn. When a child hears “no”, the child has to begin problem solving and has to use her creativity to think of alternatives. If you never say “no” to your child, you are depriving your child of some opportunities to learn to control herself in different situations, to develop creativity and problem solving skills, and to respond appropriately to those in authority over her. Children who do not learn how to handle frustration in these preschool years will often demonstrate behavior that is “out of control” during the elementary school years. So...please do set limits for your child.

TOYS

Preschool children do not need fancy toys. They learn best when they can explore their environment by creating things and using their imagination. Children create things by building with blocks, playing in the sand or dirt, coloring and painting, cooking, using Play-Doh. They create with their minds when they make up stories, play with their imaginary friends, develop rules for a new game, act out a new role by wearing “dress up” clothes, and play with non electrical toys like cars, trucks, and dolls. You can encourage your child’s creativity and imagination by:

1. Limiting the number of toys your child has available
2. Selecting toys that encourage imagination – blocks, building toys, crayons, Play-Doh
3. Providing old clothes, hats, and shoes for “dress up” times
4. Allowing your child to help cook by stirring the batter, measuring ingredients
5. Providing a large cardboard carton for your child to use
6. Making up stories together. You start the story and let your preschooler finish it.
7. Limiting television, video games and access to games on your smart phone

Children who watch more than one hour of television a day demonstrate less creativity and imagination. Children who watch videos will often limit their play to simply repeating what they have seen on the video instead of making up new characters with new actions and a new story line.

IMAGINATION and HUMOR

Three year old children develop their imagination and often make up imaginary friends who they talk to and play with. Your child’s imaginary friend can experience all the bad and good things in his life and help him work out his conflicts. Please respect your child’s privacy regarding her imaginary friend – don’t laugh about this in front of other people. Encourage her to tell you what activities her friend is doing and ask how her friend is feeling. This will often provide insight into your child’s thought life. Your child will also be developing a sense of humor as well as the ability to empathize with other people.

CHORES

Chores are a wonderful way for your child to learn about her world. By helping to set the table or sort the laundry, she can learn skills that she will need later on. By picking up toys, he learns he is responsible for helping to keep his home clean and tidy. When you say, “I need your help”, your child learns she is an important person in the family. Children need to feel “needed”, and participating in household chores helps children know they are important members of their family.

READING

The best thing you can do for your child is read to him. He will be introduced to many new ideas, new facts about his world, new activities. He will also be learning the fundamental concepts that are important for learning to read – turning pages, reading from left to right, the idea that letters make words, and may begin to learn the sounds the letters make. Children whose parents read to them every day will usually perform much better in school.

Do not push your child to learn to read, but if she is interested, you can teach her the sounds the letters make. When first learning to read, the “short vowel” sounds are learned before other vowel sounds. (“a” as in apple; “e” as in elephant, “i” as in igloo, “o” as in octopus, “u” as in umbrella) Then you might try showing your child a three letter word like hot, cat, dog, pot.

PRESCHOOL

Parents often feel pressured to enroll their children in preschool. Children of this age do not need an academic environment, but do benefit from the opportunity to play with other children. Children learn through play. They learn how to interact with others, how to use their imagination to develop games and rules. They learn how to negotiate and problem solve. Preschoolers also need time to use their big muscles by running, climbing, throwing balls, and jumping. If you are looking for a preschool, look for one that allows children plenty of time for these kinds of activities.

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