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Understanding Your Three-Year-Old and Your Four-Year-Old

Based on publications of The Gesell Institute of Human Development:
Your Three-Year-Old by Louise Bates Ames, Ph. D. and Frances L. Ilg, M.D.
Your Four-Year-Old by Louise Bates Ames, Ph. D. and Frances L. Ilg, M.D.

Preschool children grow by leaps and bounds physically, mentally, and socially. From tears and tantrums to affectionate kisses and uncontrolled exuberance, a preschooler's moods and feelings can be confusing. Knowing what to expect at different developmental ages can help parents understand, cope with, and nurture their child's emotional development.

Preschoolers aged two to five years can have emotions that demand attention, validation, and resolution. They are intense, entangled, confusing, and surprisingly sophisticated. They produce tears and then suddenly, smiles.

Sometime in the late-preschool years, a child develops the capacity for "emotional thinking." This is the rich and full result of being able to combine ideas and feelings logically. By the time a child is four years old, he can arrange these emotional ideas into various patterns and knows the differences between emotions (what feels like love versus what feels like anger).

He understands that his impulses have consequences. If he says he hates you, he will connect the sad look on your face with his outburst. Much as he built a house with blocks, he can now build a collection of emotional ideas. This gives him the ability to plan and anticipate and to create an internal mental life for himself. Most importantly, he has learned which feelings are his and which are someone else's, and the impact and consequences of his feelings.

What began as a basic interest in the environment grows into a desire not only to interact with the world, but to re-create and re-experience it in his mind. This cognitive development propelled by his or her social and emotional awareness is a sophisticated process that happens invisibly but inevitably as your child grows.

Every six months of development seems to bring another twist to the emotional saga. The typical three-year-old may be happy, calm, secure, and friendly. As the year goes on, however, this same child may become anxious, insecure, fearful, and determined. This

equilibrium and disequilibrium alternates from ages 18 months to five years. Just as you're getting used to your child again, a few months pass and she becomes someone new, but not necessarily improved. Emotions can coil up one inside another, such as when aggression is masked as fear or when anger obscures helplessness. When these feelings are shuffled around every six months, is it any wonder that the parents of preschoolers are often baffled, and fatigued?

Understanding developmental stages is essential to good parenting. It helps you prepare. Children have different timetables for their development. Although each child has his or her own individual growth timetable, all children go through stages.

Here are checklists of traits of three-year-olds and four-year-olds from the Child Welfare League of America. Remember, though, that children do have many individual differences in the way they develop. Every child develops in his or her unique way; these are general guidelines.

Three-Year-Olds

Children are learning to do more things for themselves. This helps them feel independent. Children want to please their parents, particularly from around age three and a half through puberty. It is critical that they be able to please you. If you are too difficult to please, they give up and become rebellious or withdrawn. Some children, however, hit their most obstinate stage at three or three and a half. Once you survive that, give them lots of praise for pleasing.

General traits of three-year-olds are:

- * Still say no a lot, but are becoming a bit more cooperative
- * Favorite word now is "Why?"
- * Attention span is increasing
- * Begin to play with other children
- * Active imagination; may enjoy imaginary playmate
- * Can repeat short nursery rhymes and understand simple stories
- * Speak in short sentences
- * Learning to share and wait for their turn
- * Imitate others
- * Want to please parents if relationship is good
- * Very active; large motor skills developing rapidly
- * Small motor skills (using a pencil or crayons) begin to improve
- * Can build a tower of blocks
- * Getting neater at mealtime, but still lots of spills
- * Need help in dressing
- * Can wash and dry hands and face
- * May develop a slight stutter

Four-Year-Olds

In general, four-year-olds are easier to manage than are twos and threes *unless* you have become locked into a power struggle. Although many fours will not use the defiant "NO" to every directive, they will often find other ways to resist parental authority. Dawdling and selective listening are simply passive ways to assert their independence.

General traits of four-year-olds are:

- * Quite verbal; able to express themselves in words, complete sentences, and conversations
- * Ask constant questions
- * Attention span is longer than at age three
- * Still very imaginative
- * Recognize colors (Caution: Some children are color-blind.)
- * Can match sizes, shapes, and colors
- * Play well with other children
- * Boss and criticize others
- * May be afraid of the dark, thunder, animals, etc.
- * Enjoy dramatic play-puppets, dolls, dress-up, cars, etc.
- * Learning right from left
- * Love physical activity
- * Can go up and down a short ladder
- * Throw balls overhand
- * Balance is good
- * Can dress alone, manage buttons and shoelaces, and may be able to zip and snap
- * Able to cut with scissors
- * Begin to form letters, sometimes backwards

Positive Parenting Tip for Child Behavior for a Three Year Old

Children at the pre-school stage are developing a number of new skills, including: wanting more independence ("I want to do it by myself!"); asserting their wants ("I want that!"); and learning about friendship ("Give that back!"). One of the best things you can do when parenting a three-year-old is to support your child in attaining these new skills without allowing them to become demanding or spoiled. They are learning language skills at a rapid rate and need you to model how to verbalize requests that expresses their needs in socially acceptable ways. It will take many, many repetitions to fully form this habit.

To ensure you don't fall into unhealthy habits that promote power struggles, choose to use a firm—but kind—approach to everything. Always look for ways that your child can learn from each situation. Re-direct bossy or demanding behavior verbally by modeling nice ways to request help or express needs, desires, and emotions.

The more you can allow your three-year-old to do things on her own (and they won't be perfect), the less likely she will be to fight you on everything. Look for household tasks that she can do at her age and find ways that she can help you out. Have her fill the dog bowl, hold the door open for you when you are bringing groceries into the house, set the table, match socks in the laundry, fold dishtowels, etc. The busier you can keep her doing positive behaviors, the less chance she will move towards negative ones. Even if, however, you take this approach, your daughter is still going to test you.

Learning how to motivate our children to want to be well behaved takes time and practice. It takes real discipline and commitment on the part of the parent. These global tips should help establish a healthy environment for interacting with your three-year old.

* **Ignore the Negative and Praise the Positive Behavior:** Look for ways to inspire your three year-old to want to be well-behaved and helpful. "Once you finish putting away your toys, we can look at a book together; Once you finish being sad, we can go for a walk."

* **Don't Model Power Struggles:** We are modeling for our children how to act every single minute of the day. Our kids learn more from what we do than from what we say. If they see us pulling rank as "boss", they will attempt to be "boss" too. This can lead to pretty intense power struggles. An alternative approach would be to act and talk in a way that inspires collaboration and teamwork, "Let's set the table; It's time to do laundry, will you help me?" Instead of boss, see yourself as your child's coach or guide, responsible for providing them with experiences to learn from and allowing them to experience the consequences of their actions. Of course, you are still the boss because you are the adult and the responsible party, but focus on modeling the behavior that you want. Use your finesse to get what you want in the long run – a cooperative and enthusiastic child.

* **Provide Boundaries with Flexibility:** Give clear guidelines. Leave room for flexibility, if needed. For example, "Your toys need to be cleaned up before we go to Grandma's. Do you want to clean them up now, or in 5 minutes from now?" If they still don't clean up, then you might not go to Grandma's that day. Be firm, not nagging. In the example above, not going to Grandma's is the consequence of not picking up. Let it be so. Children need to know what the rules are and, more importantly, they need to know you will follow-through with the rules. Once you become consistent with your behavior, your children will learn to trust what you say and will improve their behavior accordingly.

* **Practice Kind Firmness:** There is no need for yelling, nagging, threatening, or berating. State what you need to happen and help your child comply. Make consequences real. The key is you must follow-through. Do this without yelling, scolding or punishing. Don't buy into their tears, and definitely don't get into a debate. Stay firm, but stay kind. This often takes a lot of self-control on the parent's part. The key is not taking your child's non-compliance or misbehavior personally or as an affront to your power. Children are learning, and you are their teacher.

* Use Consequences That Relate to Their Behavior: To facilitate learning, make certain any consequences used are directly related to the misbehavior. For example, when your child is rough with the computer, computer time is over; when your child is splashing water out of the tub, bath time is over; or when your child is goofing off with their food, dinner is over. Again, do these quickly, but kindly.

* Appreciate Your Child: Children want to please and they want to know that their contributions make a difference. Remember to tell them so—and often. Make certain that they always know that you are frustrated or dislike their behavior but still love them immensely.

Life with a Four-year-old

If you are living with a four year-old, you will recognize the following description. This description was taken from an anonymous mother sharing stories on a parenting blog.

During the fourth year, a parent will likely deal with the child using profanity, becoming obsessive about death, a tendency towards playing guns and other violent play, stealing, lying, talking back to you, challenging the need for authority, giving up naptime, fighting bedtime, uncontrollable emotional outburst, intensified whining, tattling, bullying, hitting and kicking. If you could bottle the energy of a four year old and sell it as a pill for adults, you'd be a millionaire. They can play actively for hours and hours a day physically and still not be exhausted. Their minds work overtime and you'll be asked at least 100 questions about how the world works by lunchtime. I've never understood parents who don't enforce a regular bedtime, because by the time 7pm rolls around at my house, I'm exhausted. My son could easily go for hours longer. Four year olds are relentless. Four year olds do not show their parents mercy.

I'm just convinced that four is a challenging age. The point is to be consistent, pick your battles, have patience, and be prepared.

There also parts of four that are extraordinary and sheer bliss. My son is ravenous for information and knowing how things work. It's a good age to being reading fun chapter books to them that you loved as a child, it's a good age to plant a garden, to see them draw a picture that you can actually decipher, and to have big conversations. My son is fascinated by hot air balloons and can tell you all about how they work, why the air is heated so it becomes light and rises in the air, and will pretend he is flying on a hot air balloon. He is very interested in the galaxy and other planets. As I put him to bed the other night, I told him I loved him to the moon and back. A few minutes after I'd left his room he came out and said "Mommy, I got to tell you one other thing. I love you to Pluto and back—and that is really far!" How can you not love these moments? The thing is, these are the moments you record in the baby books. You just leave out the stealing, hitting, and swearing.

Last week at playgroup, he and a friend decided to pull down their pants in the backyard and chase another friend around trying to urinate on the kid. Of course, I was horrified and curiously wondering “can you even pee while you run?” at the same time. When I asked my son why he was behaving this way, he simply said “it was a hot day and we just wanted to make sprinklers for all the kids to play in, mom”. His intentions were only the best. We just had to discuss why “man made” sprinklers are not appropriate. So, he and I are slowly but surely surviving four together. We are talking about emotions, how to properly behave, and learning about values. I figure if we can just get past four, then we will survive...well, until its time for puberty.

The funny thing is, once they hit puberty, even though they have grown and developed so much, they all seem to re-visit age four all over again!