



# Your 3 year old's development

**Your 3 year old is moving from being a toddler into childhood.**

They're beginning to be OK about spending time away from you.

They have a rich imagination, and love to play and be physically active. However, this means they may be scared of things too, or to try new things.



## Relationships

Loving and stable relationships are essential to your child's emotional and physical development, both now and in the future. Your child will be better able to cope with stress, have fewer behaviour problems, and have a healthy self-esteem and rewarding relationships.

It is important your child knows that they can always count on you – not only when they are happy, but also when they are upset or not feeling 'OK'.

## Changing relationships

Better language skills mean you can start having conversations, and your child can start telling you how they feel and what they're thinking. It's important to really listen, so your child knows you care about what they're saying and thinking.

Your child can say how they're feeling – happy, sad, angry – and knows that you have feelings too. It's a good time to teach them to say 'sorry' and when to say it – apologising for your own mistakes also helps them to understand about saying 'sorry'.

## How can you develop healthy parent-child relationships?

Try to consistently respond to your child with warmth and love, as this helps develop trust in you and trust in the world around them.

- **Actively listen to your child.**
  - When they are talking, stop and make eye contact – and show you're listening by saying things like 'Wow! What happened next?'
- **Spend quality time with your child.**
  - Make sure they have time to do things they enjoy – join in, even if only for a few minutes.
  - Pay full attention to your child when you're together – try to put your phone away at these times.
  - Eat meals together as a family.
- **More conversations mean more questions.**
  - Take these seriously, and try and provide real answers, so your child knows to trust what you say.
  - It's OK to say if you don't know the answer – or try and work the answer out together!
  - If the topic is difficult, like a pet dying, use simple language that your child can understand, and tell them if you're feeling sad too. It's important to encourage conversation about tough topics so your child knows they can always talk to you about anything.
- **Cuddle your child often** – but only if they want to be cuddled.
- **Read books and sing together.**

- **Help your child's growing independence.**
  - Let them take the lead in exploring and play – help them just enough when they need it. (You still need to make sure they're safe as young children aren't aware of danger.)
  - Get them to help with simple jobs like setting the table – this helps your child feel 'big' and helpful.

You can find lots more tips and ideas on the free [Bright Tomorrows Parenting App](#).

### What if I have concerns about my relationship with my child?

Sometimes it can be hard to relate to your child the way you want to. If you have any concerns about connecting with your child, or feel you don't understand or know how to respond to their needs, talk to your child health nurse or your doctor.



## Talking and communication

Your 3 year old is now talking in simple sentences.

There is so much going on inside their head that often the words can't come out fast enough to describe it all!

Enjoy sharing in your child's wonderful imagination – this can include some children constantly asking questions.

- Your child can usually let you know what they want.
- They will love you reading to them – they may want the same book over and over – and over!
- Most 3 year olds speak very clearly, but may stumble over some longer words.
- **Your 3 year old:**
  - can understand 1000 words or more
  - can understand 'place' words – 'under', 'on', 'beside', 'back', 'over'
  - will ask lots of 'What', 'Who', 'Where' and 'Why' questions
  - can talk about what happened yesterday and about tomorrow.
- ★ **Contact your child health nurse or doctor if your child:**
  - speaks in a way that's often hard to understand
  - isn't using sentences of 3 or more words.

### Be patient

Help your child by building on what they say to you.

- Don't correct 'wrong' words – be positive and include the correct word in your answer.
- Try to slow down your child's constant questions by asking them questions instead, or suggest some 'quiet time' – at least for a few minutes!





## Books and reading

Telling stories, talking and singing are really important for many areas of your child's development.

Your child is learning about sounds, words, language and reading, and books. This not only helps with the important skill of learning to read and to enjoy reading, but helps your child learn to focus.

Reading stimulates imagination and helps your child learn new things, including feelings and social skills, and about other cultures. It's also a lovely time to share and bond with your child.

- Have a routine that includes some reading time every day. Have a bookshelf and special reading spot if you can.
- Turn off any screens (including your phone) and other distractions.
- Sit together so your child can see your face and the pages of the book.
- Choose books with lots of colour, repetition and rhythm.
- Join your local library, and let your child start choosing books – if it's too hard, pick out 3 books, and ask them to choose one.

## Reading is all about having fun with books.

- Start talking about a book before you read it – why they chose the book and what the story might be about.
- Use your finger to follow the words, or get your child to do this.
  - Point out things like capital letters and full stops, and sound out some of the words.
  - See if your child can see any letters that are in their own name.
- Talk about what might happen next or how the character might be feeling.
  - Talk about how your child might feel if something similar happened to them.
  - Ask if they liked the book and why.

Find out more about choosing books and learning to read at [better-beginnings.com.au](http://better-beginnings.com.au)

## Social and emotional

Your 3 year old is just starting to learn how to get on with others. They can manage strong feelings a lot better now, but will probably still have some tantrums.

They're starting to understand social skills like sharing and being kind, but only when they feel safe and happy.

- Three year olds often enjoy being around and playing with other children. Your child is learning that other people are real and have feelings – and can get upset when other people are upset.
- Taking turns is a skill that they'll learn as they approach 4, but they still probably won't share if they're upset or tired.
- Your child can usually wait a short time for what they want – 'We will go out after you eat your lunch'.
- Your 3 year old is starting to accept that they can't have everything they want, and is less likely to have tantrums than when they were 2. They're eager to please you, so with your help, they might be happy to try something else or wait a few minutes.
- Your child may still be scared of monsters, noises, the dark or some animals.
- Your child now has a sense of humour, and loves to laugh at situations and repeat silly (and sometime rude) words.
- Give your child choices but keep them limited – 'You can wear your red or blue shoes'.
- It's OK if your child still needs a blanket, special toy or other comforter when tired or away from home.
- Your child is starting to take responsibility for toileting, but may still have accidents (wet pants) during the day and be wet at night.

## Developing understanding

Your 3 year old may still find it difficult to sort out 'pretend' and 'real'. Can a witch really put a spell on you? Can children grow wings and fly like in picture books?

Three year olds don't tell 'lies' as such, but sometimes imagination and reality get mixed up. Never laugh at your child's confusion, and use simple information when explaining things.

### Your 3 year old:

- now understands that their mind is separate from yours, and that you can't read their mind
- shows some understanding of time, and that night follows day
- understands the meaning of tall, short, big and little, but still thinks that a tall, thin glass holds more than a short fat one – so there can be mistakes with pouring
- enjoys pretend play such as dress-ups
- can say how old they are.

## Physical skills

- Your child will really start to enjoy physical activity – running, jumping, swinging, climbing, dancing and riding a tricycle or scooter.
- They might get tired and cranky if they don't have some quiet time between 'exercise'.
- You still need to make sure your child stays safe – always supervise them.
- As children are learning more complicated skills, they may become less coordinated and lose confidence – or become more frustrated – for a while between 3½ and 4, but these skills should return very quickly.

### Your child:

- will love to splash and play with water. Always supervise children around water.
- can run fast and stop without falling over
- can walk up and down stairs by themselves
- will be able to walk along a plank because their balance is better
- can use pedals on a tricycle
- can roll and bounce a ball, and is getting better at catching
- can throw a ball with 2 hands, using shoulders and elbow
- can eat with a spoon and fork.



## How to help your child develop

The more things you let your child try, the more they'll learn. Enjoy their achievements with them.

- Give your child lots of freedom for physical activities – riding a tricycle or scooter, ball games, learning to swim. Remember that 3 and 4 year olds are too young for team games.
- Where possible, allow your child lots of time to 'get things right' or to do it for themselves – be patient!
- Give your child plenty of warning before they have to finish an activity, pack up toys or get ready to leave the house.
- Provide simple games with turns and rules so they can start to learn about cooperation.
- Children of this age enjoy rhythm. Sing simple songs together – and provide things to bang on.
- Your child will enjoy painting and drawing, so provide big pieces of paper and pencils, crayons or paints. Talk about the story their drawing tells.
- Provide books with pictures that tell a story – ask questions about the pictures and talk about the story.
- At this age, it's OK to let your child watch a few appropriate TV shows (see page 19). Just like books, they may want to watch the same thing over and over again. Try and watch together, talk about the show, and repeat the songs and activities with your child.
- Provide lots of love, fun, approval and encouragement. But you also need to start setting limits that you can – and are prepared to – keep.

## When to be concerned about your child's development

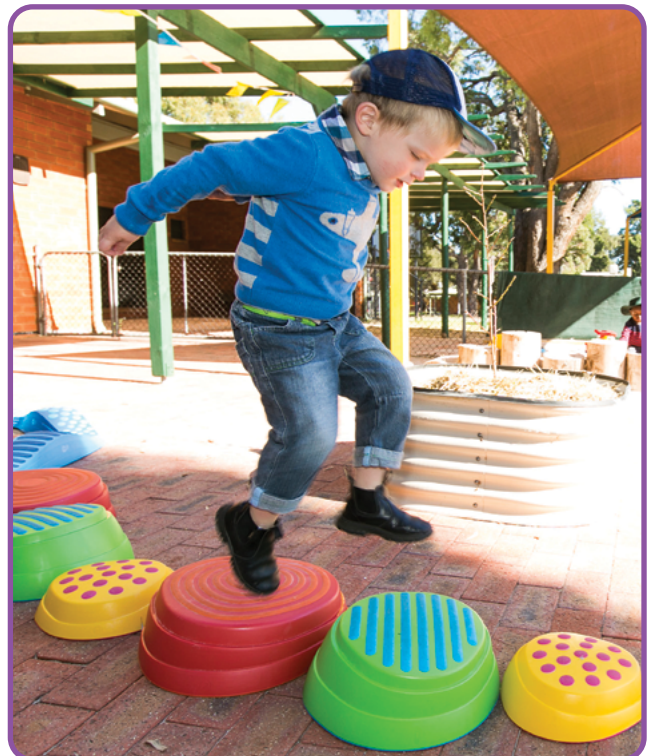
All 3 year olds are different and develop at different rates.

If you are worried about your child's development, or if they can't do things they used to do, it's important to see your doctor or child health nurse.

Sometimes children need a little help with their development and getting in early will help – and if nothing's wrong, it's good to know that they're developing normally.

### ★ Contact your child health nurse or doctor if your child:

- is difficult to understand when they talk, or if they're not using sentences of 3 or more words
- doesn't seem to understand what you say to them, or can't follow instructions
- doesn't talk often during play
- doesn't play pretend or make-believe, or plays the same way over and over again
- isn't interested in using the toilet or is frightened to use it
- stays scared of things for a long time
- doesn't play with other children or adults, or is often aggressive with other children
- can't jump with both feet off the ground.



## Play with your child

Play is important for your child's learning, development, growth and health.

- Your child's brain develops faster in the first 5 years than at any other time. This is when the foundations for development, learning and health are all being laid down.
- You are your child's first teacher and playmate. Children learn best when they are actively involved and having fun with you during everyday activities, so spend time each day playing, learning and having fun with your child.
- Through play, children learn skills like moving, thinking, speaking, socialising, and how to manage emotions.

### When it comes to play, 3 year olds:

- have high energy levels so need lots of active play – running, climbing, hopping, jumping, sliding, swinging, dancing and starting to ride a scooter or bike with trainer wheels (see page 18)
- are getting better at ball games
- enjoy drawing and painting, holding a pencil well in their preferred hand. Their drawings are easier to recognise – people, faces, houses.
- are able to listen to short stories, and begin to enjoy jokes
- ask lots of questions and want to know about everything
- are getting better at sitting still – enjoying simple card and board games that involve taking turns, memory and thinking skills
- enjoy more social play with other children – learning how to share and play together, especially pretend play.

## What you can do:

- Be available – find lots of small amounts of time every day to do fun things together. Get down to their level, show interest – copy what they do and encourage them to copy you.
- Let your child make choices about how to play.
- Try not to rush your child when they're trying something new, and allow time for lots of repetition.
- Be ready to settle disagreements if several young children are playing together.
- Limit screen time – children learn best through doing things (see page 19).
- Join your local playgroup and toy library.

Don't expect your child to always do everything you ask, especially while they're already doing something they enjoy.

- Warn your child a few minutes before they need to stop what they're doing.
- Your child will learn that, even though they have to leave, they'll come back for another play.
- Sometimes it helps to offer something else fun, like 'we're going home to see mum'.

It might be upsetting if your child cries when it's time to leave the playground, but remember that they were having fun, so don't stay away from playgrounds. They are fun, and good places to learn skills such as climbing and running.



### Some activities to try:

- Include play in everyday activities – while driving, hanging out the washing, and during mealtime and bath time.
- Play pretend and dress-ups – children love to make up and act out stories – shopping, doctors, mums and dads, fairies and superheroes. Providing things like dolls and toy animals, toy cars and trucks, gardening and DIY tools, and cooking equipment can help.
- Get outdoors and active – simple outdoor activity is ideal for young children. Let them have fun on swings, slides and climbing frames – or balancing on logs.
- Children enjoy playing with balls – a soft ball is great to practise catching, throwing and kicking.
- As your child gets more confident, they'll enjoy challenges such as riding scooters, trikes and bikes, visiting playgrounds, playing ball games, trampolines and swimming. Make sure your child is safe – but let them try things on their own.
- As your child gets more patient, try some table top games – puzzles (around 10 pieces), dominoes, card matching or simple board games.

### Keeping your child safe

Supervise your child closely all the time, especially around water, play equipment, or when they're using things like scissors, pencils, glue or paint.

- Babies, toddlers and young children can choke on small toys and objects. Keep older children's toys away from younger brothers and sisters.
- Do regular safety checks to make sure your home is safe for your child to explore.

#### **SAFETY!**

**Toddlers and young children do NOT understand about danger.**

**You need to watch your child now they are exploring, moving faster and farther, and reaching many more places and things – even climbing on things to reach higher.**



### Active play

Active play gets your child moving, and should raise their heart rate.

**Young children need to be active every single day because it helps:**

- build strong bones and muscles, and maintain a healthy weight
- improve balance and coordination
- improve learning and thinking
- keep them healthy – physically, mentally and emotionally.

**Your child should get a daily total of at least 3 hours of physical activity spread across the day, including an hour of energetic play such as:**

- walking, running, climbing and jumping
- kicking and throwing
- dancing.

Try to make the activities fun to encourage your child to keep doing them, and to explore and discover new things about the world and themselves.

Active play doesn't have to be organised, or have rules or special equipment. Young children need lots of time and space to just run around and play. Backyards, school and park playgrounds, parks, and the beach are all great places for active play.

**Active play can be:**

- at home, such as dancing to music
- at the beach, in the bush, your garden or at the park – such as running and climbing, or ball play
- outdoors or in a shopping centre, such as walking – instead of sitting in the stroller – or playing on play equipment.



## Screen time

Screen time is the amount of time spent looking at all screens including TVs, computers, smartphones, tablets and video consoles.

For children aged between 2 and 5, limit screen time to 1 hour or less each day.

### Why limit screen time?

For healthy development, your child needs:

- face-to-face contact and social interaction with adults and other children to develop social skills
- to learn to entertain themselves without screens. This helps them learn how to experiment, think, learn and solve problems.
- to be active for at least 3 hours throughout the day. Children usually don't move during screen time.

### Screen time can affect sleep:

- Screen time just before bed can delay how quickly your child falls asleep or the quality of sleep they get.
- Sharing a book or story together is a healthy way to calm down and prepare for sleep.

### How you can help:

- Set an example. Avoid using your phone when you're with your child – during meals, bath time, story time and play time.
- Turn off TVs and other screens when not in use, or when you're playing, reading and talking with your child.
- Set limits around screen time and stick to them. When your child does use technology, choose content that helps them learn skills like problem solving.
- Balance screen time with physical and creative activities and other types of play.
- When your child can't be physically active, like a rainy day, choose other activities

that help build skills such as reading, singing, puzzles and storytelling.

- Don't feel you need to introduce technology at this age. Your child will learn how to use technology when they are older.
- Learn about staying safe on line, and talk with your child about using technology, staying safe and making good choices.

## Your child is unique

Every child is different and may develop at different rates.

So, if your child does not do some of these things, they may be 'working' on a different area of learning and development. However, children usually follow the same pattern of development, and it's good to feel that your child is developing normally, in their own unique way.

If you are worried about your child's development, or if they are very different from other children, talk with your doctor or child health nurse. If there is a problem, it's better to get help early.

### Need more information or help?

- Child health nurse
- Bright Tomorrows App ([brighttomorrows.org.au](http://brighttomorrows.org.au))
- Better Beginnings ([better-beginnings.com.au](http://better-beginnings.com.au))
- Nature Play WA ([natureplaywa.org.au](http://natureplaywa.org.au))
- Ngala Parenting Helpline ([ngala.com.au](http://ngala.com.au))
- Playgroup WA ([playgroupwa.com.au](http://playgroupwa.com.au))
- Raising Children Network ([raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au))

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Your 3 year old's development - extract from [Your Child 2–4 years](#) magazine.

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